Like a phoenix rising from the Ashes ... Chances for a Pils Renaissance?

Masculine tart | For decades, Pils was the image and foreign exchange earner for "good German beer". Starting in the west and north of the republic, Pils became the category-defining variety in the country of the economic miracle - with an almost unbelievable growth from today's perspective into the 1980s. In the course of globalisation and numerous other changes in society and consumer behaviour, there was a period of declining Pils consumption in the German-speaking world that continues to this day. Is a turnaround still possible?

WHAT ROLE pilsner played(s) as a routine beer in Germany can be seen in the degree to which the product was taken for granted when beer was ordered. Even if there is no exact folklore evidence, a map based on research by the Katapult publishing house gives a rough idea of what is most likely to be brought to a customer's table in the catering trade when the order is placed.
"One beer, please!" reads - without any additional information. The domain of the pilsner in the German-speaking world is clearly illustrated in Figure 1. In the last ten years, the Helle has probably spread from Bavaria to neighbouring regions successively more than the gastro-standard for beer.

Author: Dr. Uwe H. Lebok, K&A BrandResearch AG, Röthenbach near Nuremberg

lThe golden era of Pilsner enjoyment

After the Second World War, the reconstruction of the two Germanies and the beginning of the economic miracle, general prosperity set in. As a result, deprivation and children (today's baby boomers) were made up for.

were. There was something to celebrate again, whereas the social orientation and the lived traditions of the generation born before 1950 were still strongly influenced by norms such as duty and obedience, church and folk rituals (going to church together, family Christmas baking, etc.), archaic role behaviour, men's pubs and Sunday beer for roasting. Beer was "the" usual German drink for toasting for the mass of the population: sparkling wine was rare (and for very special occasions), "good" wine (except for the wine regions) was too expensive and little established. Beers were what was drunk,
what was regionally available. In rural areas, almost every third village still had its own brewery. And in larger cities, beer was consumed "whatever we had" and could be obtained directly from the brewery's ramp.

Gastronomy was formative and home consumption in bottles was only in its infancy.

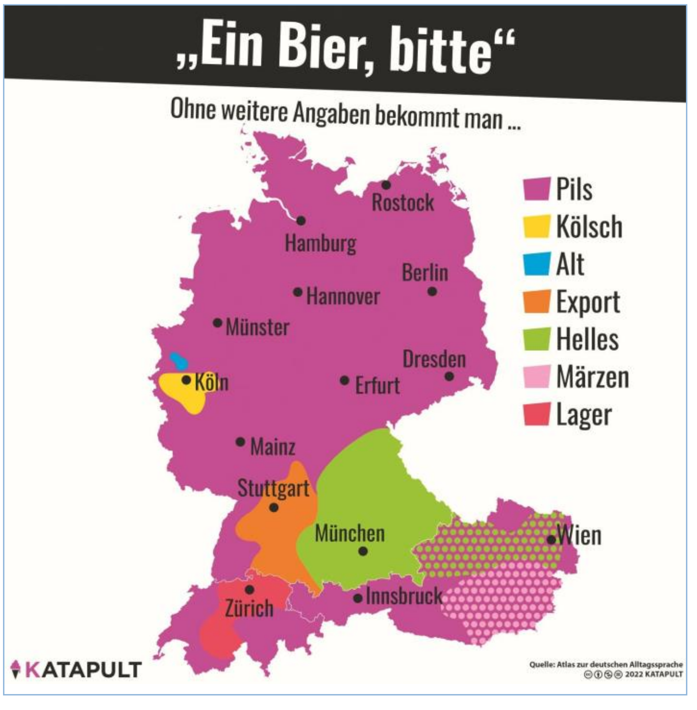

Fig. 1
Mental dominance of the Pilsner in beer orders in the catering trade

in its infancy. With the emergence of modern food retailing and the replacement of the corner shops around the corner, the triumph of the commercialisation of food and beverage began. Above all, the replacement of the antiquated clip-on bottle by the Euro bottle in the 1960s and the related introduction of Euro crates that could be stacked and palletised "freed" the consumer from the unwieldy wooden crate for home and after-work consumption. Within a few years, the 20-bottle Euro crate for beer (as well as the mineral water bottle) had established itself as a poolside container among the population. And with the simplification of shopping, drinking occasions at home also increased, which was to increase the per capita consumption of many beverages in the following period.

The convenience advantage was also taken up by the trade, which was relatively quickly reflected in an expansion of the sales area for beverages: beverages moved closer and closer to the consumer's door; it became more and more convenient to bring one's favourite beverage into one's living room and thus no longer have to take off one's felt slippers in order to go to the nearest beer pub for a beer. Home beers, which were at home in densely populated conurbations, were relatively quick to seize the distribution opportunity that arose, via

In the 1960s, the beer market grew far beyond its local area of origin through more intensive cooperation with the trade and established itself as a national market. In the rapidly growing industrial centres of the 1960s, Pils was the main drink. North Rhine-Westphalia in particular became the engine of the nationwide Pils expansion, which was to reach its peak in the 1990s (Fig. 2).

The simultaneous promotion of Pilsner also increased the general attention (Fig. 3) and pushed other varieties into a "perceptual-psychological oblivion". In addition, the positive experiences of the first large breweries with several brewery locations and a focus on Pils (such as the Wicküler brewery, which was successful until the mid-1980s) were in a way role models for imitators. Ex- port, which was also frequently drunk in large parts of the republic, lost its significance and was pushed into the mental niche of worker's and loser's beers in the context of the fulminant rise of Pils.

Warsteiner in particular was able to distinguish itself as a brand from the competition during the Pilsner Gold Rush phase. Style and enjoyment were at the forefront of the positioning, which clearly distinguished itself from the competition in attitude ("the only true thing") and communication. At the time, Warsteiner was an icon through its appearance.

among the breweries: here Warsteiner from the slimmer NRW bottle, poured in a mushroom tulip similar to sparkling wine and in a golden robe as the queen among beers, there rather dull-looking traditional (and in spirit pre-industrially retarded) home beers.

lReasons for the decline

Unfortunately, the following still applies: Trends come, trends go! Warsteiner's statement brought success and growth to well over 6 million hectolitres. Until the early 1990s, the brand was the measure of all things in terms of
"style of beer". However, various mistakes in brand management subsequently led to the decline described several times in the literature. Instead of Warsteiner, other breweries with Pils monocultures like Krombacher, Bitburger & Co. climbed the German beer Olympus. Like Warsteiner, however, none of the top Pils brands, which were growing strongly at the time, succeeded in establishing their strength in the national market iconographically beyond the German border in the course of progressive globalisation, the opening of borders and the beginning of digitalisation.

Consequently, the trend was not continued across borders and also came to a standstill domestically. Growth was only achieved unilaterally through promotion-supported sales, and the national TV pilot brands were alternately in the middle of the crisis.

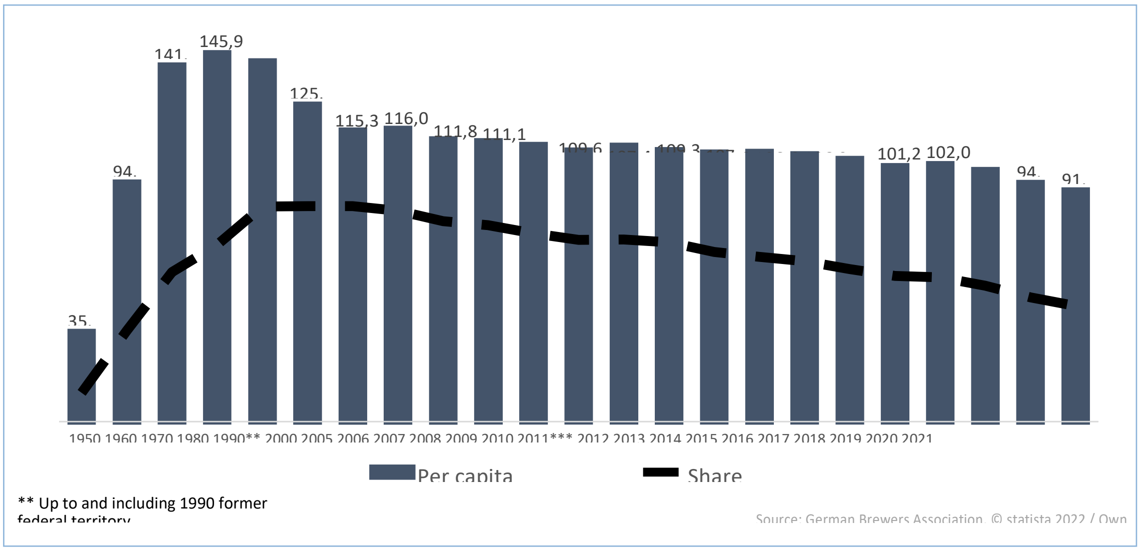

Fig. 2 Per capita consumption of beer 1950 to 2021

Fig. 3 Pil advertising in the 1970s

in the range of handouts. The consumer's perception of good Pils taste was that it was becoming cheaper and cheaper, and the impression of Pils as the "crown of beer enjoyment" was eroding.

In addition, the emergence of regionality since the end of the 1990s has caused a counter-trend to the "global over-regional". Original, unconventional beers and breweries were rediscovered, which was given additional impetus by the craft beer wave and the interest in homemade and artisanal beers. In this context, most classic pilsner brands tended to experience a mental downgrading: In a "new" beer community that is more strongly oriented towards experiential culture, self-praising TV com- mercials of pilsner brands seem anachronistic and un-credible in the context of the learned price reductions and selling off of pilsner crates.

In addition, a general shift towards fruity, uncomplicated tastes can be observed among consumers. This applies not only to beer, but also to other foodstuffs. In a context of "quaffable" light beers, fruity and lighter wine and sparkling wine creations or chilled iced tea moments, Pils simply tastes too bitter for many potential consumers. And for elaborate pilsner drinkers, it is not clear compared to other "craft beers" what a brand A pilsner tastes like, why a brand B pilsner tastes better or a brand C pilsner somehow tastes different from XYZ.

lLittle Pils – big time

Taste prejudices block access to something. Especially for future generations. In combination with out of time sayings like "There's always a Pils between the liver and the spleen" and other (male) old wives' tales, as well as associations with drunken football fans and cheap standard beers, there is no sense of enjoyment for people who are to be won over to the special taste of Pils. As with other products that are associated with a specific environment and stereotypical consumer patterns or have simply fallen into everyday oblivion (such as Limburger, clarified butter, black pudding, cheese candy, aquavit, cognac), new contextual approaches to the consumer must be created. If you like, this means a re-evaluation for Pils like "Warsteiner 2.0".

If Pils is to be something like a "refinement" in terms of taste, it is not enough to simply call it a "noble Pils" or something similar: rather, Pils must create added value for consumers, which makes a Pils of brand X better than Pils of brandY. Or what generally makes Pils a better (taste) solution for people's everyday lives than another beer or the currently dominant Helle. It simply needs new Pils contexts that make it easier for (new!) consumers to make decisions. Where they think to themselves: now a Pilsner! And nothing else. Preferably from a specific brand.

Pils therefore needs a "new look" in order to be better wired to consumers in everyday life. What comes after the corner pub? What comes after the bourgeois advertising? And what comes after the indefinable mass taste at the lowest price?

Brand management as well as the communication of quality and good taste requires staying power and consistency. Other beverage categories, such as wine, show that this can be successful: after the glycol wine scandals and surviving the zero hour in 1985, Austrian wine rigorously focused on quality (and not quantity), with the strictest wine law in the world: and even German wines, which until the 1980s still had the image of a cheap garden wine for pensioners who like to sing, have undergone a complete change of perception in the last 20 years, both in terms of quality and consumer popularity. In the case of beer, we can still observe the change of attitude in light beers with amazement.

And with the Pilsner? Here, too, there are encouraging examples: For decades, Trumer Pils has stood for high quality in the sense of "Enjoy value instead of buying cheap! - Not a mass-produced Pilsner, but a pleasure drink from Austria. The Upper Franconian Gampertbräu, with its mildly refreshing, iconographic Förster Pils, is high on the popularity scale of regional beer drinkers. And the tangy-fresh Urpils from Karlsberg has also undergone a change in perception: simply be available in everyday life wherever people are looking for a tangy (more masculine) refreshment - also "customised" with special editions in cans for the Rocco del Schlacko festival.

Other (courageous) brewers will surely follow in order to lift the Pilsner out of its everyday stupor in the beer world. To give their pilsner a new shine in terms of its concept. Which it deserves. ■