



LITHUANIAN BEER
A rough guide

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Lithuania is home to one of the world's great beer cultures, a beer culture that developed in relative isolation from the rest of the world. Farmhouse brewing survived to a greater extent in Lithuania than anywhere else, and through accidents of history the Lithuanians then developed a commercial brewing culture from their unique farmhouse traditions. The result is a beer culture that is unlike any other, deserving a position next to the Belgian, British, and German/Czech beer cultures.

This gem of world brewing has somehow remained almost entirely unknown to the outside world, and this guide is an attempt to change that. The guide is meant to serve two purposes. The first is to persuade beer enthusiasts to make the journey to Lithuania to try the beers for themselves. The second is to help visitors to Lithuania navigate the enormous and enormously confusing beer selection on offer there. For first-time visitors it is almost impossible to know which beers to choose, and to know what it is you are drinking once you have made a choice.

In this little booklet I document what I've learned so far, but please do not consider this definitive. There is much more to Lithuanian beer than what I know, and I fear that despite my best efforts, some of the content in this book is wrong. So be warned.

This is only the first edition of the guide. I am hoping to be able to expand and improve it in the future, as my research into Lithuanian



Figure 1.1: Kupiškio Salaus Alus

beer is still going on.

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First and foremost, a heartfelt thanks to my wife and daughter, who have put up with the absences required by this project.

Martynas Savickis is the source of much of the information in this book, via email and conversations. He has also contributed many helpful comments and corrections on drafts of the book. My heartfelt thanks for all his help.

I'm deeply indebted to Vidmantas Laurinavičius, owner of beer tourism.lt, for taking me to visit some of these breweries, answering lots of questions, and correcting many errors in drafts of this book.

Many thanks also to Martin Thibault, whose blog posts in French from his 2012 tour of Lithuania have been very helpful. Martin also kindly read and commented on the final draft.

Some of the information in this guide derives from Atis's excellent guide to Latvian beer, Wikipedia, and the alutis.lt web site (via Google Translate).

Many thanks to Tomas Sutkaitis and Rimvydas Laužikas for answers to questions and pointers to further material. Also many thanks to Reddit user eimantas for translating some passages from Lithuanian for me.

Evan Rail gave me advice on navigating the maze of publishing options, for which I'm very grateful.

1.2 Feedback

This is very much a work in progress, so if something is wrong, not clear, or not covered, please send me an email, at larsga@garshol.priv.no. As you will see, sources of information are limited and very hard to come by, so any input at all is very much welcome.

I have a number of sources on Lithuanian beer written in Lithuanian. If you can help me translate these into English please do get in touch. Your English does not need to be perfect, as I only want

to understand the content, and have no intention of publishing the translations.

I blog about beer, both Lithuanian and other kinds, at <http://www.garshol.priv.no/blog/beer/>.

Chapter 2

The beers

All the great beer cultures have their distinctive beer flavours, and Lithuania is no exception. It really is possible to recognize a beer as Lithuanian by the flavour alone. Of course, industrial beers are an exception. These taste much the same all over the world, and their Lithuanian counterparts are no different. But Lithuania has 40-70 smaller breweries, and these are the ones that produce beers that are clearly different from those in the rest of the world.

Exactly what produces these flavours is not known with any precision at the moment, but it seems to be a combination of ingredients, methods, and equipment. Local yeast and local malts are definitely part of what sets these beers apart. The farmhouse brewers are the most distinctive, but microbrewers have also preserved elements of the traditional brews, and have introduced some new innovations of their own.

This chapter attempts to give an overview of Lithuanian beer styles, how they taste, and how they are brewed.

2.1 What to expect

In general, Lithuanian traditional beers are session beers. Extreme beers of the modern craft type are not produced by the farmhouse brewers at all. Their beers are made to be drunk all night long, as the

farmer would drink his own ale. So unless you like subtle, drinkable beers like German dunkel or British bitter, you may be disappointed, although some of the more modern brewers have begun to produce strong and powerful-tasting local beers.

The first thing you should do, before having your first sip of Lithuanian farmhouse ale is to reset your brain. The beer in front of you may look like a saison, or a zwickel, but it is in fact neither. It belongs to a completely separate beer tradition that has developed its own frame of reference, and you have to treat it as such. You should, in a sense, expect the unexpected.

Lithuanian beers are typically slightly on the sweet side, and generally don't use much hops. The bitter backbone that balances most western beer is often absent in Lithuanian beers, which means the flavour may take some getting used to. The truly traditional beers often have very low carbonation, which is also an acquired taste.

An earthy, dusty, dry straw flavour is very common, and could be described as one of the distinctive Lithuanian flavours. This flavour seems to come from the Lithuanian malts used by many of these brewers. Another is a kind of nutty, oily flavour that recurs in many beers. Diacetyl is very common, and seems to be used to enhance some of the malt flavours. It should not be seen as a fault.

Finally, you should be aware that these beers have a very short shelf-life, and are not always well treated. Where you drink the beer will have a major impact on how it tastes. As a rule, it will be much, much better at the brewery than anywhere else, and bars/pubs closer to the brewery will generally serve better-tasting beer. So if you can get out of Vilnius you can expect the same beers to taste better.

Summer is a lovely time to enjoy Lithuanian beer gardens and the countryside, but unfortunately it is not the best time for beer. The bottles and kegs are often not artificially cooled, and so the already short shelf-life is even shorter in summer.

2.2 Beer styles

Lithuania, rather like Belgium, is not really very strong on defined beer styles. A few named styles exist, but very often breweries just make a beer they like without giving any consideration to what style

it fits. It's therefore difficult to provide any clear guidance to what sorts of beer exist, but this section makes an attempt anyway.

Note also that style information given about these beers on beer web sites like Ratebeer or Untappd are deeply dubious, and sometimes downright absurd. For example, Jovaru Alus is listed as a Dortmunder/Export on Untappd, while it's really a farmhouse ale made from unboiled wort with a yeast that seems to be neither ale or lager yeast (see 2.3.3 on page 20).

2.2.1 Kaimiškas

Literally, "kaimiškas" means "from the countryside", but it's come to be the name for Lithuanian farmhouse ales. Kaimiškas is not a single style, but rather a range of traditional beers brewed using traditional techniques, with certain family resemblances. In its most authentic form, a kaimiškas should be brewed with home-made barley malts, a private yeast strain, and wild Lithuanian hops. The wort should then be fermented in open fermenters, sometimes at temperatures as high as 29-35C. The beer should be unfiltered and unpasteurized, darkish or amber, and at 5 to 7% in strength. Carbonation is typically very low.

In practice, some of these characteristics have been abandoned by various brewers, and the line dividing kaimiškas from modern, commercial Lithuanian beer has not been clearly drawn by anyone. Many sources say kaimiškas is different in the different regions of Lithuania, but little is known for certain about this.

There is actually a legal definition of kaimiškas in Lithuania, which requires kaimiškas to be made from malted barley, boiled water, and hop products, by fermenting unclarified wort (that is, wort that hasn't had the protein separated out, for example by boiling) with brewer's yeast. It also requires the beer to be unfiltered. Unfortunately, this doesn't fit actual farmhouse brewing practice very well, and thankfully, the countryside brewers ignore this regulation.

2.2.2 Šviesusis

Lithuanian šviesusis is perhaps best thought of as an eastern European cousin of Belgian blonde or Franconian landbier: a sprawling, ill-



Figure 2.1: A šviesusis from Biržu Alus

defined style that nevertheless does have some clear characteristics. A proper šviesusis should be sweetish, hazy, and about 5-7%. It will typically have an earthy, mealy, strawy flavour. It's often somewhat oxidized, herbal, and floral. It's light, delicate, and refreshing. The main driver of these beers seems to be Lithuanian malts, and in some cases Lithuanian yeast. Diacetyl, sometimes quite a lot of it, is very common, and should be seen as part of the style.

The name literally means "pale" and be aware that there are also industrial beers which have this word on the label without actually being real šviesusis. Those are basically pale lagers like those everywhere else in the world.

2.2.3 Tamsusis

Tamsusis is the dark brother of šviesusis, at about the same alcohol strength, and also typically sweetish and hazy. The bitterness is typically very low, and toasty, fruity, wild berry flavours dominate. Generally these are highly drinkable beers with lots of flavour, and surprisingly different from the dark beers made elsewhere in the world.

The name means "dark", so you will also find it on bottles of industrial lager where it really means German dunkel more than anything specifically Lithuanian. Again as with šviesusis this can make it difficult to discern what is a real tamsusis and what's just a dark beer.

2.2.4 Keptinis

Keptinis is an ancient Lithuanian style of beer, best thought of as a form of kaimiškas where the malt is baked into breadloaf shapes before being step-mashed. The baking is important to the flavour, as it caramelizes the malts, and starts enzyme processes in the malts. The style is mentioned by name in written sources from several centuries ago, so it's clear that the style has existed for a long time.

Only two keptinis are brewed today: one by Ramūnas Čižas, which is probably the most authentic, and another made by Kupiškio Alus.

2.2.5 Raw ale

The kaimiškas made from unboiled wort should probably be considered a separate style, as these beers are very different from beers made from boiled wort. As far as I know, Lithuanian has no specific name for this type of beer. In order to extract bitterness from the hops the hops are boiled separately to make a kind of “hop tea”, which is then added to the wort.

Not boiling the wort means that much more protein from the barley remains in the beer, which fills out and rounds the mouthfeel. It also means that the beer doesn't last as long, since the protein quite quickly starts breaking down, which affects the flavour. These beers are also more prone to infection, obviously, but the stability problems seem not to have anything to do with infection, as the beer does not normally go sour, even when it's past the “sell by” date, which can be 3-4 weeks.

Raw ale is known from farmhouse brewing in other regions, too, such as Norway, Finland, Estonia, and Latvia. Very likely it was the difficulties with boiling the wort in wooden vessels that made brewers skip the boil. Later, with the introduction of metal kettles, boiling became possible, but many preferred the flavour of the raw ale, and stuck to this technique.

2.2.6 Stone beer

Hot stones have traditionally been used in Lithuania for heating liquid for cooking and brewing in wooden vessels, since these cannot be heated over fire. The use of hot stones was widespread in Lithuanian brewing, and it seems that the stones have been used for a number of different purposes. More detail remains to be unearthed, but a few pieces of information have emerged.

In the Šimonių district in the north, hot stones were used for mashing. Hot stones have also been used for mashing, and Dundulis recently released a beer called “Moko Maukas,” which was brewed with this technique. It's possible that hot stones have also been used for boiling the wort, as in German steinbier, but the Lithuanian tradition seems to be entirely separate.

Moko Maukas was a one-off beer, unfortunately, so there are no stone beers consistently available on the market.

2.2.7 Other styles

Duminis was a Lithuanian style of smoked beers, but as far as is known it is extinct at present.

Old documents reference “Curonian beer” (“Kuršiju Alus” in Lithuanian) as a distinct style of beer, but nothing more is known, and today it is long extinct. The name is a reference to the region of Courland, which is along the coast from Silutė in southwestern Lithuania to Riga in Latvia.

The farmhouse brewers would reuse their malts after running off the wort for the main beer, producing a weaker beer called “antrokas” (literally meaning “second”). This is the same as English small beer, Norwegian spissøl, or Finnish kotikalja. Some brewers even made “trečiokas” (third), which is so weak it barely ferments. No commercial breweries make these at the moment, but some home brewers do.

Those who have tried it say that the Lithuanian malts have such immense character that even the trečiokas, containing only the ghost of the malts, is full of flavour and very refreshing.

2.2.8 “Live” beer

“Live” beer (or “gyvas alus” in Lithuanian) is a general concept in eastern Europe, known at least in Russia, Ukraine, Latvia, Poland, and Lithuania under different names. It generally refers to unfiltered beers, and consumers usually think of them as having live yeast, but they may in some cases actually be pasteurized. It can be thought of as an eastern European variant of German zwickel.

In Lithuania, however, the Lithuanian Ministry of Agriculture in 2012 defined “gyvas alus” as beer in which 1 ml of beer contains at least 100,000 colonies of living yeast. So beers described as “gyvas” in Lithuania can in fact be assumed to contain living yeast, and these are often more interesting than their “dead” counterparts. Note that “gyvas” beers are often lagers, and not traditional Lithuanian beers. They are still worth trying.

2.2.9 Pea beer

During Soviet times there were periodic shortages of everything from toilet paper to food, and malt was no exception. In desperation brewers would sometimes use other ingredients together with malts in order to be able to make enough beer, and peas was one of these. It was an emergency measure in Soviet times, but since peas add body and softness to the mouthfeel, as well as a delicate flavour, some brewers have continued making beer with peas.

In the 90s Ragutis (now Volfas Engelmänn) made a beer with peas, called Širvenos. In 1995 beer writer Michael Jackson, whose grandparents came from Kaunas, visited Ragutis, and wrote a story about the Širvenos. In that story he claims brewing beer with peas was an old custom in the region around Biržai¹.

Širvenos is a lake, just to the north of Biržai. The lake is artificial, and was created in 1575 to protect nearby Radvila Castle. Jackson claims to have found more examples of pea beers, called Biržai and Radvilu. Apparently there was also a Kalnapilis Širvenos, also made with peas. In these beers the amount of peas in the grist seems to have ranged from 3% to 15%.

Today, however, the only one in production is Širvenos from Biržu Alus. It's not as different as it may sound, since the peas make up only 5% of the grist, but it's a pleasant and interesting beer even so. The peas are fresh and green, bought from farms near the brewery. Note that the draft version is unfiltered, and so may be more interesting.

2.2.10 Kvietinis

A number of beers using wheat are made under this name, but they do not use German hefeweizen yeast, and so are more like unfiltered lager beers that use some wheat in the grist. They are fairly similar to the wheat beers (pshenitshne/beloe) made in Russia, Ukraine, and Poland, and not really something uniquely Lithuanian. They can still be good beers for all that, however.

¹Other sources say the same, but I have not been able to verify this.



Figure 2.2: Vilniaus Kvietinis

2.2.11 Porter

The porter style of beer developed in London in the early 18th century, and became popular in the Russian Empire, of which Lithuania was a part at the time. English brewers exported porter to many parts of the globe, including the Baltic countries and Russia, but later it was also brewed locally, including in Lithuania. It was originally brewed with ale yeast, but from the late 19th century lager yeast became increasingly popular. In 1938 new Soviet brewing standards were introduced, requiring the use of lager yeast, and so from that time on all porters in this region were brewed with lager yeast.

Some brewers make porters in Lithuania today, most of them with lager yeast, but some with ale yeast. These porters are fairly similar to the porters found in Latvia, Russia, and Ukraine, and again not really something specifically Lithuanian. Some of them, such as Utenos Porter, are quite good.

Note that bars serving Lithuanian-style tamsusis may describe these as “porter” or “stout” while they are in fact nothing of the kind. Dundulis makes Labas Vakaras, which they describe on the label as a porter. In reality it’s a very Lithuanian take on porter. So beware that this style label can be very confusing. When used on industrial beers it generally refers to the type of Baltic porter you would expect.

2.2.12 Gira

Gira is an old, traditional Lithuanian drink which in earlier times was made by fermenting just about anything: honey, grain, bread, herbs, and so on. Today it has developed to be quite similar to Russian “kvass”, in that it’s mainly made from rye bread, but other fermentables like beetroot, berries, and honey can also be used.

It’s debatable whether gira is beer, especially if there is no cereals in it, but it’s still a traditional and interesting alcoholic drink. It’s usually very low in alcohol (around 0.5-1.2%) and can have a wide range of flavours. Some brewers add honey or spices, whereas others make it more pure. A good gira can be a thing of real beauty, while others can be closer to a simple industrial soft drink, so there is considerable variety.

Many of the farmhouse brewers make gira, and these are very highly recommended, but difficult to find.

2.3 Ingredients

Commercial Lithuanian beer generally uses only one unique ingredient: Lithuanian malts, but a few beers also use Lithuanian yeast. Some beers also use unusual ingredients like peas, raspberry stems, hemp seeds, red clover, roasted walnuts, and more.

2.3.1 Hops

In general, hops play only a minor role in Lithuanian beer. They are used to provide balancing bitterness and protect against infection, but generally serve at most a background role today. Several sources say that historically beers from the region of Samogitia were very bitter, but sadly these beers seem to have died out.

Hops are not grown commercially in Lithuania any more, but traditional home brewers often use Lithuanian hops. They are generally picked in the last days of October, and any dry or brown cones are discarded. Home brewers who use these hops will generally add what seems to outsiders crazy amounts of hops to their beer. The reason is that the yield from these hops is much lower than that of foreign hops. The low yield is further reason why many commercial brewers don't use them.

However, Lithuanian hops used to be grown commercially earlier, at least in the Kaunas region. In the inter-war period, six Lithuanian hop varieties were selected by scientists for preservation, and are held in a local gene bank. Among these are the varieties Fredos Taurieji, Fredos Kartieji, Fredos ankstyvieji, Fredos derlingieji, Raudoniai, and Kauno Gražieji. The latter was used by Kauno Alus in the Soviet period, but they stopped after independence.

On joining the EU, Lithuania tried to get EU support for hop growing and linen production, as both were highly traditional Lithuanian industries. For some reason, the final EU report said "hops don't grow in Lithuania", which is absurd. Why the report said so is not clear.

After independence Ukraine started a project to grow high-alpha hops in Lithuania, and experiments on this were done, but the results were poor, and word of this spread. This may have contributed to the EU report. Analysis has been performed on commercial Lithuanian hop varieties by researchers at Kaunas University. They found that alpha acid, which is what contributes most of the bitterness in hops, had levels from 0.9% to 2.5%. Lithuanian wild hops from around the country were also analyzed and found to have alpha acid levels of 0.7% to 1.8%. For comparison, German noble hops tend to be 3.5%-5%, while modern US hops are often 7-15%. So clearly Lithuanian hops generally have very low bitterness.

Beta acid, which contributes aroma only, was also analyzed with levels of 5-8% for the Lithuanian commercial hops and 1-3.5% for the wild hops. The figures for the commercial hops are normal for hops generally, if perhaps at the lower end of the scale. The figures of the wild hops are quite low.

2.3.2 Malts

Lithuania has a number of commercial producers of malts, the biggest being Maltosa and Viking Malts, but there are several smaller ones as well. Maltosa makes about 22,000 tons of malts a year, some of which is exported to neighbouring countries. Most of the interesting Lithuanian brewers use Lithuanian malts, but some use imported malts, which usually seem to be Czech or German. Some brewers prefer foreign malts, and describe it as more predictable and with higher yield.

The Lithuanian malts have strong character and contribute substantially to the unique character of Lithuanian beer. The flavours described under the šviesusis and tamsusis styles are probably mostly from the Lithuanian malts. I am still working on trying to understand this aspect of Lithuanian beer better.

2.3.3 Yeast

Most Lithuanian commercial brewers use foreign commercial yeast, but there are a few exceptions. At least Ramūnas Čižas, Jovaru Alus, Su Puta, and Linkuvos have ancestral yeast strains that have been

preserved by home brewers through generations. The Jovaru Alus strain certainly has unique properties. For one thing, it can ferment at temperatures up to 29C with no ill effects. Martin Thibault brought back some bottles of it to Montréal after visiting Lithuania. Canadian beer enthusiast Olivier Bergeron was so struck by how dry the beer seemed, despite having a full body, that he decided to measure the final gravity, and was shocked to find a gravity of 1002.5. So the beer is in fact nearly entirely devoid of sugar, but still feels soft and round in the mouth.

Marie-Julie Favé, home brewer and doctoral student in biology, decided to do DNA sequencing of the yeast at McGill University to learn more. She compared the DNA to that in the GenBank database, which is the world's main DNA database, containing all DNA sequences submitted by researchers for the past 30 years. The DNA showed it clearly to be a *Saccharomyces* yeast, but it did not match any known species. The yeast therefore seemed to be a new species unknown to science, although it is possible that it is instead a hybrid of two existing species. It could also simply be a heavily mutated *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. Favé is not a specialist on yeast, so these results must be seen as tentative for the moment.

According to Freddy Delvaux, former professor of brewing at the University of Leuven, determining whether it really is a new species is a major project. From what is known of the yeast's properties he thinks it's possible that it really is a new species. I have made contact with researchers who are interested in the question, so once I can get a sample of the beer or the yeast it should be possible to determine what species it is.

Very little is known of the strains held by Čižas, Su Puta, and the other traditional home brewers. How similar they are to the Jovaru strain is unknown. At least two of these breweries are in areas where it is not common for brewers to share yeast.

Many have expressed skepticism that these brewers can actually keep their yeast strains going, since commercial lab yeast goes bad after 10-20 batches have been brewed. However, the DNA analysis indicates that brewers have indeed kept their own yeast alive. It's also known that brewers managed to keep yeast strains going without microscopes or lab techniques in the centuries before Pasteur, so there seems to be no obvious reason why this should be impossible.

There is also evidence from Norway that brewers there have been able to keep viable yeast strains going for many centuries, and that these have been surprisingly pure. Two Norwegian farmhouse yeast strains have been analyzed, and were found to be pure brewer's yeast (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*), with no sign of bacterial infection whatsoever.

Aldona Udriene, the brewer at Jovaru Alus, says that the yeast sometimes needs to be cleaned, and that she does this with baking soda. It's also known that Lithuanian farmhouse brewers would store their yeast in the well or underground, or by drying it on linen threads. Sometimes brewers would make extra batches of beer just to keep the yeast fresh.

In the movie *Vys par to alus* (see chapter 8 on page 87) you can see a brewer bring out a plastic container full of yeast, looking rather like porridge, and spoon it into the wort. The brewer uses only half the yeast. The beer must then be left in silence to ferment. If fermentation gets too vigorous it must be cooled down. Adding hops to the wort can also be done to slow down fermentation. After fermentation, the yeast is collected from the beer, rinsed in cold water, and added back to the pot. After making the sign of the cross over the yeast, it's put back in storage.

Traditionally, the purity of the family yeast was seen as symbolically equivalent to the maidenly purity of the family's women, and so brewers would be very reluctant to let anyone near their yeast, or to speak of it at all. An old curse in Lithuanian is "kad tu surūgtum", literally "you get sour", meaning "you let your yeast go sour".

Where these yeast strains come from is not clear. Aldona Udriene claims that the yeast strain she uses was found by her grandfather in the forest. No further detail is known at the moment, but as *Saccharomyces* yeasts are known to exist in the wild, in honey, in wasp nests, in oak sap, and on fruit, it's entirely possible that this is where some of the brewers found their yeasts.

2.3.4 Other

Quite a few other ingredients are added to Lithuanian beers. One is peas, as described in section 2.2.9 on page 16. Another is raspberry stems, used as a kind of primitive filter in Piniavos Laukinių Aviečių.

The brewer says the raspberry stems give flavour to the beer, rather like in “raspberry stem tea”, whatever that is. This beer is certified by Fondas as being authentically traditional, which implies that these ingredients have a long history in Lithuania. Piniavos have also made a beer with red clover, and another with cherry leaves.

Roasted hemp seeds are used in *Tarušku Kanapinis su Kanapem*, which has an unusual spicy flavour. How much of the flavour comes from the hemp seeds I can't really say, as I haven't tasted hemp seeds. Whether there is a tradition behind this ingredient is not clear, but hemp seeds are traditionally part of the Lithuanian family Christmas dinner. Note that ordinary hemp does not contain enough of the intoxicating substance, THC, to have any effect at all, so you need not worry about the effects of drinking this beer.

Kupiškio's Magaryčiu has roasted hazelnuts in it. Whether this is traditional is unknown. The flavour is slightly nutty, but whether this is from the hazelnuts or something else is also not clear, as many Lithuanian beers have an oily nutty flavour.

Quite a few Lithuanian beers are brewed with honey, such as *Jovaru Su Naturaliu Medumi* (that is, “*Jovaru with natural honey*”). There is also one from *Su Puta*, and probably quite a few more.

2.4 Process

This aspect of Lithuanian beer is not as much explored as it should be, but a few peculiarities have been noted. One is the use of hot stones, as already mentioned. Another is the brewing of raw ale.

Another peculiarity is fermentation, which often takes place at extremely high temperatures as noted earlier. One brewer (*Joalda*) uses commercial lab yeast, but takes care that the starter is very vigorous, and then ferments very powerfully for three days at room temperature. After that, they cool the beer down, and let it ferment at lower temperatures for another two weeks. Their fermentation is thus a kind of hybrid top- and bottom-fermentation.

At the moment little is known about which brewers use what methods, and it seems very likely that more surprises remain to be uncovered.



Figure 2.3: Jovaru Alus sign at Šnekutis

2.5 Six favourite beers

Walking into a Lithuanian beer bar can be a confusing experience when you find yourself confronted with dozens of beers with incomprehensible names from totally unknown breweries. So to give a better idea of what Lithuanian beers are like, and which ones to try, descriptions of six favourites are given here.

This isn't necessarily the top six in order one to six, since I've let my selection be influenced by factors like importance, availability, and variety. I've also left out all beers that are not in some sense Lithuanian, so while Dundulis Ledzukas is an absolutely stellar Czech-style pilsener, it is not in this list.

2.5.1 Jovaru Alus

The classic among Lithuanian farmhouse ales, and the house beer at the famous Šnekutis bar in Vilnius. Also the beer that sparked a sensation when the yeast was DNA sequenced, and rightly so, because it really is a unique and very good beer. The best place to taste it is at the brewery, because being unboiled, unpasteurized, and unfiltered, it is not very stable. However, even at Šnekutis it's still plenty good.

The beer is hazy amber, around 6%, with a small white head. The dominant flavour is mealy, herbal walnut oil, with peppery floral notes. It feels sweetish and full-bodied, but analysis shows it has barely any sugar at all, thanks to the yeast. Probably much of the body comes from the wort not being boiled.

Despite being decidedly odd and very unlike other beers, I've found it harmonic and highly drinkable. Some people find it hard going, however. Should you find yourself among that unfortunate minority, consider Tim Webb's Ratebeer rating: "I have no idea what this is but it is to be respected. Take a glass of Orval, oud lambiek and sahti alongside it and you will start to get it."

2.5.2 Piniavos Seklyčios

This beer has been around for many years, but was fairly rare until recently, so not many people have tried it, which is a shame. It's really a textbook example of how elegant and drinkable traditional beers can be, despite their reputation for being rough and edgy.

A clean, fresh, delicious kaimiškas that's relatively clear and deep yellow, at 5.8%. It's kind of subtle, with a musty earth cellar base on top of which sits rich fruit, dusty straw, and hoppy resin in a very harmonic combination. In the mouth it's soft, smooth and just slides down. It's really a thirst-quencher and a beer one could easily drink by the bucket.

Note that the best place to have this beer is Prie Uosio in Panevėžys. It's not likely to be as good in Vilnius, but do not pass over it even so.

2.5.3 Davra Varniukų

A lovely example of Lithuanian tamsusis, and by now a classic. When in good condition it's a masterpiece of the brewer's art. It's made by Davra, which started out as a traditional farmhouse brewery, but Varniukų is a modernized beer. It's still highly Lithuanian, and miles away from foreign dark beers like German dunkel or porter.

The aroma is dominated by earthy wild berries, over a herbal caramelly background, with notes of straw. It's very complex, with different flavour facets coming and going as you drink it. There is very little hop bitterness, which balances well with the subdued sweetness, but to a western drinker it feels like the beer is lacking the bitter backbone that carries most western beers. Once you get used to it, however, and learn to appreciate it on its own terms, you realize the low bitterness is not actually a weakness.

Varniukų is widely distributed and can be found even in bars and restaurants which don't focus on beer. The Šnekutis Mikolajus can usually be relied on to have it.

2.5.4 Senojo Vilniaus Tamsusis su Prieskoniais

This beer is included precisely because it is *not* a traditional beer, but rather an unusual and unusually successful modern beer that's different from most of what's made elsewhere in the world. It's part of Vilniaus Alus's Senojo Vilniaus (that is, Old Vilnius) series, and the name means "dark with spices". Note that it's strong, at 8.2%.

And spicy it certainly is. It looks like any filtered tamsusis, but the aroma of ginger, raisins, and cinnamon, with touches of alcohol and honey, is entirely unique. The spices combine really well, but don't completely hide the alcohol, which heats up the soft mouthfeel a bit. It's sweet, but also a bit astringent, probably from the spice.

The flavour is an odd combination of cinnamon, lavender, ginger, and cardamom, and what's perhaps most remarkable is how well the combination works. It's rare for powerfully spiced beers to be truly harmonic, but somehow this one is. It seems to really divide drinkers, who either love it or hate it.

2.5.5 Ramūno Čižo Keptinis

The only commercially available beer from Ramūnas Čižas, and another classic of Lithuanian brewing. This beer was one of the first Lithuanian farmhouse ales to become widely available in Lithuania, and is by now well established. It's a keptinis by style, and brewed on a relatively modern kit on a fairly small scale using ancient processes. The brewer doesn't even use a thermometer, instead judging the mash temperature with his fingers. The yeast is his own family yeast.

It's hazy dark brown, with a powerfully fruity banana aroma with earthy caramelly notes, somewhat on the dry side, with resinous notes. The fruit and banana character runs through the whole beer and is very likely from the yeast. The flavour has traces of rye and smoke as well. It's quite complex, and quite unusual.

Section 6.1.1 on page 49 on Čižo Alus describes availability.

2.5.6 Kupiškio Salaus Alus

This pale, unfiltered beer at 5% was my first real Lithuanian beer, and even though it was now three years ago I can still remember that first sip. I'd flown into Vilnius knowing little more than that traditional beers existed in Lithuania, and could be bought in specialist bars in Vilnius. I went into Bambalynė and asked the friendly waitress for a recommendation, and she picked this beer.

The label was kind of classy, and in the glass it was pale and hazy with a normal white head. But the aroma! It was as if someone had left a big bale of hay to bake in the sun all day, then dropped me from a crane face-first into the hay. The intense, dusty, dry straw-like flavour was followed by peppery oily fruit notes. I knew at once that I was onto something big.

By coincidence, another blogger independently found it in Poland at the same time, and was deeply impressed. His Ratebeer rating says things like "What citrus rind, what craziness! Wow. The flavor is just a joyride of the senses! Intense waves of bitterness, with HUGE giant straw/grassiness, effervescent peach skin/white grape skin is clear. So astringent and so good."

On subsequent visits to Lithuania I've made a point of each time buying a bottle again, hoping to be able to share it with friends in Norway, but it has always been sour and infected. I even tried it draft in Panevežys, but found it out of sorts there, too. Lithuanian informants tell me it's now been off the market for a while.

I included it in this section even so to make a point: Lithuanian beers are inconsistent and unstable. Martin Thibault called them "changelings", to describe how they seem never to appear the same to any two people, or even to the same person twice. So beware!

Chapter 3

Culture

Lithuania has a distinct and unique culture that's the result of a history unlike that of any other European country. Many aspects of Lithuanian culture besides just beer are worth exploring, and we cover a few of them here.

The Lithuanian language is closely related to that of its northern neighbour Latvia, but religion and many other aspects of Lithuanian culture derive from Poland to the southwest. Lithuania was also a major European power for long enough that many aspects of Lithuanian culture derive from the Lithuanians themselves.

3.1 Food

Lithuania has a rich culinary tradition which is worth exploring. In fact, there is a Lithuanian foundation called Lietuvos kulinarinio paveldo fondas (the Foundation for the Culinary Heritage of Lithuania), or "Fondas" for short, dedicated to preserving and promoting Lithuanian culinary heritage. They publish books and other informational material, and also certify recipes and food products as being truly traditional.

Fondas also maintains list of culinary heritage treasures which includes two traditional farmhouse breweries (Ramūnas Čižas and Jovaru Alus). They also certify some beers as being truly traditional.



Figure 3.1: Smoked pig's ears

Some brewers display the Fondas certification logos on their beers, or on their web sites, so you may want to look for this.

Local cheese and cured meats of high quality, following local tradition, are sold in several of the beer pubs as snacks. I recommend trying them. Another traditional beer snack is “kepta duona,” which is sticks of black rye bread fried in oil and garlic. It’s excellent. Some places you can also get it with a slightly acidic cheese on top.

Perhaps the best-known Lithuanian dish is “cepelinai,” a kind of large potato dumpling with meat, usually served with sour cream.

3.2 Language

One of the difficulties in exploring Lithuanian beer is the language, which causes several different kinds of difficulties. In this chapter we’ll try to clear up the main issues.

The Lithuanian language is an Indo-European language, like nearly all other languages in Europe, and belongs to the Baltic branch. There are only two languages still alive in this branch: Lithuanian and the neighbouring Latvian. The two languages are not mutually intelligible, but more closely related to each other than to other languages in the region. Polish and Russian are Slavic languages, and thus quite distant from Lithuanian, even if the Baltic and Slavic language families are related.

3.2.1 Pronunciation

The first problem is figuring out how to pronounce the names. Luckily, Lithuanian orthography is very systematic, so once you know a few basic rules, pronouncing names well enough to be understood is easy.

Let’s start with the consonants. The letter **g** is pronounced as the English “g” in “gore”, even if it’s followed by “e” or “i”. So the beer style “gira” has the same “g” sound. The letter **j** is pronounced like “y” in “yes”.

The letter **c** is pronounced “ts”, as in most of Eastern Europe. The rest of the consonants cause no particular problems, except for the use

of the caron: “ˇ”. This accent can appear on č, š, and ž, and the effect is pretty much the same as if you’d written **ch**, **sh**, or **zh** in English.

Lithuanians like to transcribe foreign names, so you may find a name like “Džoržas Bušas” that looks Lithuanian, but if you use the pronunciation rules in the paragraph above you may change your mind. Stop and think a little, and you may see that it’s actually “George Bush” in Lithuanianized form. We’ll get back to why the “-as” is added to the end.

The vowels are pronounced in the way that’s pretty much standard everywhere except in English and French. So if you pretend to be speaking, say, German, you’ll get it fairly close to correct.

3.2.2 Beer terms

Dealing with Lithuanian beer becomes a lot easier once you understand just a few key terms. Table 3.2.2 on the facing page contains a small dictionary of beer terms, which should make it easier to decipher labels and beer menus.

Note also that “kaimiškas” is often used to mean farmhouse ale. Literally, it means “from the countryside”.

3.2.3 Grammar

One thing that often trips people up with Lithuanian is that the language enjoys inflecting everything, even names. If you pay attention you’ll see that a person can be referred to as Ramūnas Čižas in one context, and Ramūno Čižo in another. These are grammatical inflections in Lithuanian, so it’s actually the same name.

As a rule, for male names, the ending **-as** is the generic, default ending (hence the form of George Bush’s name above). If you are addressing the person, then you use the **-ai** ending, for example to say, “Ramūnai, your beer is really good.” If you are talking about something belonging to the person, such as the brewery, you’ll use the **-o** ending.

This is why you’ll see the person referred to as Ramūnas Čižas, but his brewery is Ramūno Čižo Alaus Darykla. That is, it’s the “beer makery of Ramūnas Čižas.” Similarly, the brewery Dundulis often

Lithuanian	English
salyklo	malts
apynių	hops
vanduo	water
mielės	yeast
šviesusis	pale
gintaras	amber
raudonasis	red
tamsusis	dark
juodas	black
medumi	honey
kviečiai	wheat
kvietinis	wheat beer
imberinis	ginger
alus	beer
gyvas alus	“live” beer (see 2.2.8 on page 15)
alaus baras	beer bar
alaus darykla	brewery
bravoras	brewery
restoranas	restaurant
krautuvė	shop
parduotuvė	shop
nefiltruotas	unfiltered
nepasterizuotas	unpasteurized
stiprusis	strong
elis	ale (Lithuanianized form of the English word)

Table 3.1: Small beer dictionary

has their beers listed as, say, Dundulio Ledzukas. The *-o* ending here is the same, and simply means “Ledzukas of Dundulis”.

Unfortunately, the grammar is really complicated, because the endings will differ depending on the letters in front of them, and there are a number of exceptions. Simply knowing that “senas” means “old” is not enough, because you’ll see it as “senojo”, “senieji”, “senasis”, etc etc in various contexts. So if you want to really get this right you need a book on the Lithuanian language. But simply being aware of the issue and knowing about these basic endings helps a lot.

Chapter 4

History of Lithuanian beer

The history of Lithuania is a key part of how Lithuania came to have and preserve such a unique beer culture, and so this chapter gives a brief overview.

4.1 Prehistory

We don't know much about the history before the advent of writing in the Baltics in the 12th century. People moved here and there, language and genes shifted, they left pottery of various kinds. That's about all we know. Well, almost. We can say a little more.

We know that at this time various tribes roughly corresponding to what would become Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians lived roughly where they do now. The Estonians speaking a non-Indo-European language closely related to Finnish, the Latvians and Lithuanians speaking languages belonging to the Baltic branch of Indo-European. People lived in settlements protected by hill-forts. Many more hill-forts have been found in Lithuania than in Latvia and Estonia. Lithuania, being further south, had a longer growing season, and probably could support more people. Lithuania was also more politically centralized. This was about to become crucially important.

Several kinds of alcoholic drinks were made in Lithuania in ancient times, and beer was just one of them. People also drank mead,

and fermented horse milk. However, at some point the emphasis shifted to beer, and ancient Lithuania became a beer culture. Old folk songs have been collected, and many of them refer to hop growing and beer brewing in various forms, making it clear that beer was an important part of everyday culture. Written sources in neighbouring Poland also refer to Lithuanian “alus”, a barley beer, giving a clear impression that Lithuania was very much a beer culture.

Historically, brewers would produce several brews from the same malts, by reusing it and mashing the same malts more than once. This has been a common technique in many countries. In Lithuania the resulting brews would be known as pirmokas (first), antrokas (second), and trečiokas (third), in decreasing order of strength.

4.2 The Grand Duchy

In the 12th century, two monastic orders of warrior monks, the Teutonic Knights and the Brothers of the Sword, moved into the Baltics. This is where the curtain rises and written history begins. The Sword Brothers founded Riga in 1201 and quickly subdued the surrounding tribes, Christianizing them with fire and sword. They later moved north and took what is now Estonia. But when the time came to go south for Lithuania, the Lithuanian ruler Mindaugas raised an army, and defeated them in the battle of Saulė in 1236.

Realizing that a tribal society could not hope to hold off mounted medieval knights forever, he embarked on a modernization of Lithuania. The old slave economy was abandoned, traders were invited, western military technology was imported, and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was established.

This was a key juncture in Baltic history. Estonia and Latvia were now set for many centuries of rule by the Baltic Germans, who would eventually emerge from the monastic orders as the ruling class. The natives would be peasants and restricted from participation in rule and in many other ways. But Lithuania escaped this by establishing their own pagan state, capable of holding off the crusaders.

Thus the histories of Latvia and Lithuania diverged, even though they were closely related ethnically and linguistically. However, Lithuania’s troubles were not over yet. The crusaders continued pushing



Figure 4.1: Baltic area, ca 1250, from Wikimedia Commons, user SpaceCadet

from the north, while the Poles were attacking from the west, and Muscovy (soon to become Russia) attacked from the east.

So the next decades passed in continuous warfare, and, as a sign at the castle in Trakai said: "in this period, all resources were consumed by warfare." Remarkably, the Lithuanians succeeded in expanding all the way south to the Black Sea coast, but the cost was high, and it was clear that Lithuania needed an ally.

4.3 The Commonwealth

Part of the problem was that Lithuania was still pagan, while its neighbours were Christian. Christianizing would take a lot of the pressure off, but would be deeply unpopular among Lithuanian nobles. In the end the solution presented itself: Grand Duke Jogaila married Jadwyga of Poland in 1386, thus becoming King Jagiello (the Polish form of his name) of Poland, and establishing the Jagiellon dynasty. Lithuania also converted to Christianity.

Thus the Commonwealth of Lithuania and Poland was established, for centuries the biggest state in Europe. It solved Lithuania's problems in one way, but since Poland was much the more populous of the two countries, the state and the nobility slowly polonized. It also meant that while Latvia and Estonia turned Protestant, following the German elite during the Reformation, Lithuania together with Poland did not. So even today Lithuania is Catholic, while the northern neighbours are Protestant.

Since Lithuania was pagan until 1386, it seems likely that pagan culture lived on among the peasants for a long time. Apparently in the 16th and 17th centuries dark beer was considered sacred, with a role not unlike that of altar wine, but in a pagan context. It was brewed by women, who performed rituals during the brewing. Pale beer, on the other hand, was considered everyday beer.

The main alcoholic drinks in this period were beer, mead, and wine, in that order. Mead was a luxury drink for festivities and rich nobles, and wine, which had to be imported, even more so. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries beer dominated completely, but later mead, wine, and vodka started displacing beer. It remained the main alcoholic drink, however, especially for farmers and the poor.



Figure 4.2: Grand Duchy of Lithuania, 1200-1430, from Wikimedia Commons, by M.K.

Georg Braun writes of Vilnius in 1576 that “Locals make no grape wine, but love to drink. They drink mead and beer, and have a great liking for warm wine.” In his world atlas of 1595, Gerardus Mercator writes, also of Vilnius, that “Except for government officials, all burghers are innkeepers, selling beer, mead, and warm wine.”

Henryk Sienkewicz wrote a trilogy of novels set in this period where the action takes place in both Poland and Lithuania. They show very clearly that the primary drinks for nobles were mead and wine, and that both could be very highly prized if they were good. Vodka was also drunk, and, sometimes beer. The beer seems to often have been mixed with other things, like cream or bits of cheese.

In this period a guide was written for Polish businessmen wanting to do business in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, since this part of the Commonwealth had its own laws. This guide mentions the keptinis style of beer, so it’s clear that beer brewed in this period had some level of continuity with the traditional brewing culture as it exists today.

4.4 Under the Russians

The Commonwealth also had a fatal design flaw: the King was elected, and elected by unanimous vote among the nobles, which meant that any nobleman could stop an election. This led to the Norwegian expression “polsk riksdag” (Polish parliament), meaning a meeting that is a riotous mess where nothing is decided. The result was a weak king, and confusion at times when the realm really could not afford weakness.

So eventually Russia absorbed Lithuania in the partitions of Poland, and the two northern neighbours a few decades earlier. By 1795, the state that had dominated the map of Europe for four centuries had disappeared completely. In Latvia and Estonia, however, the Baltic Germans remained as the ruling elite, and being by far the highest-educated group in the Russian Empire, provided the Czars with statesmen, scientists, generals, and administrators. A surprising number of famous “Russians” turn out, on closer inspection, to have been Baltic Germans.

Anyway, by the time of the World War I Lithuania was predom-

inantly agricultural, while Riga was the main port of Russian trade, and the two northern provinces far more industrialized by the reforms of the Baltic Germans. The Czarist empire, already tottering, old-fashioned and autocratic, did very poorly in the war, losing all credibility with its citizens. Before the war was even over, the empire fell apart in revolution and civil war, which the three Baltic states exploited to establish independence.

After the unification of Germany in 1871 suspicion started to be cast on the loyalties of the Baltic Germans. These had no real alternative, however, to remaining strictly loyal to the Romanovs. After the 1917 revolution they found themselves pushed aside by the new Baltic nationalist movements, and stripped of their privileges. Having no love for the Soviet regime, and feeling dispossessed in their homeland, the vast majority left for Germany (particularly Prussia), thus ending seven centuries of German rule in the Baltics.

4.5 Inter-war independence

After independence there was considerable consolidation in the brewing industry, with breweries merging and acquiring one another. At this time the industrial breweries were mostly following German and British models, brewing lagers and ales deriving from those cultures.

Traditional home brewing was still going strong in this period, but was beginning to disappear. The new nationalism of the 19th century had led to a great interest in the study of national culture, of which beer brewing was seen as a part. In this period Lithuanian folklorists did a survey of traditional brewing techniques and wrote up a paper summarizing the results. These show clearly that today's brewers do indeed follow the traditional approach, at least in the form it had evolved into in the early 20th century.

4.6 Under the Soviets

During the inter-war period, knowing they were in an exposed position, the three Baltic republics attempted to form various alliances, but for a number of reasons this fell through. So when World War

It broke out, the front rolled over the Baltic countries several times, eventually leaving them in Soviet hands, to be incorporated in the Soviet Union as a three separate republics (in practice, provinces). However, they were not treated equally.

Lithuania had resisted the Soviets fiercely during the war, and the Forest Brothers continued armed resistance until forced collectivization of farming in 1951 finally reduced resistance. A few stragglers fought on for years after that. This resistance meant that Russians were not very keen on moving to Lithuania, and since the country had very little industry Russian industrial workers were not moved in, either. After Stalin's death in 1953, the Lithuanian Communist Party quietly Lithuanianized itself, going from 1/3 Lithuanian to 2/3s Lithuanian in about a decade. So the Lithuanian Soviet Republic was for the most part run by Lithuanians themselves, while the other two republics were to a much larger degree run by Russians, and saw a Russian population influx that threatened to turn the natives into minorities in their own countries.

The communist regime was ideologically opposed to all forms of private enterprise, and so all breweries were nationalized. All beer recipes were standardized, with the same six beer recipes being brewed by all breweries in Lithuania. There were often shortages of malts, which led to the use of adjuncts like sugar, corn, peas, and so on. Beer quality was often poor, since the communist planning system required only the production of certain quantities, with little regard for quality.

At the same time, traditional home brewing continued in the countryside. Since the Lithuanian communist party had succeeded in keeping its membership mostly Lithuanian, control of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic was a little less strict than that of the other republics. Many sources say Soviet officials enjoyed the traditional beers, and therefore were not very eager to stop production.

In fact, it seems that in some cases this beer was even sold illegally or semi-legally, for weddings and other local celebrations. Some beer appears to have been made for sale by *kolkhozes* (that is, collective farms) for additional income. This was all produced by traditional home brewers who basically scaled up their home production. Most of these would be brewers who were already famous locally for producing especially good beer.

Traditional brewing methods are very labour-intensive, often using ladles to transfer liquid, and equipment that cannot easily be designed for scale. The home brewers who scaled up their production had no access to industrial brewing equipment and know-how under the Soviet system. However, the deficiencies of the Soviet system taught people to be inventive and come up with their own solutions, and so the brewers invented various kinds of equipment from bits and pieces they managed to get hold of.

It seems that in this period Lithuanian home brewers began a process of reinventing traditional home brew that was to really take off under independence.

4.7 Second independence

Eventually, Gorbachev decided the Soviet system must be modernized, but the entire thing came apart in the attempt, and Lithuania declared itself independent again in 1990. The new regime established a market economy, so the Soviet state breweries were privatized. Several of these went bankrupt, or were acquired by foreign breweries over the next decade, leading to consolidation and a reduction in the number of industrial brewers.

Since establishing new businesses had now become legal, there was a wave of smaller breweries being set up, arising out of the home-brewing tradition. Many of these were formerly illegal and semi-legal local home brewers who were going legal and selling their production directly instead of via *kolkhozes*. The Davra, Rinkuškiai, Joalda, Su Puta, and Piniavos breweries at least are among the breweries that were officially started just after independence, arising directly out of the home brewing tradition.

Within a few years there were 200-400 breweries in Lithuania, which is a truly astonishing figure. If the US were to have as many breweries per inhabitant today it would have more than 20,000 breweries. The authorities responded by doing careful checks of the health and sanitation, with the result that about half of the breweries closed immediately. Many of the less successful collapsed later, or were acquired by the others, and today the figure seems to be somewhere between 40 and 70.

The industrial breweries continued producing beers in international styles, but the smaller breweries coming out of the home brewing tradition had a very different starting place. They generally started out with wooden equipment, then modernized to various degrees, with some of the modernization taking place in the Soviet period. It seems that in doing so, they invented various approaches to brewing with modern equipment, and more or less created their own brewing culture, as an evolution from the older traditional culture.

The result is a very complex landscape with brewers of many different kinds that are hard to classify. Some brewers, like Čižas and Jovaru Alus have stuck very closely to traditional methods, while others like Piniavos and Su Puta have scaled up a bit. Others again, like Joalda and Rinkuškiai have moved quite far from their roots, but still produce interesting and distinctive beers unlike those found in the rest of the world.

What makes Lithuanian beer so interesting today is essentially the innovations created by these brewers, together with the farmhouse tradition that, uniquely, is also available commercially. That innovation continues today, with new beers, and new kinds of beers, being created all the time. Lithuanian beer culture is still busily fermenting, evolving into something new, and it will be interesting to see where it's going to be in a few years.

Chapter 5

Geography

While Lithuania is a relatively small country at 65,300 square kilometers, a little bit smaller than the Republic of Ireland, it still has distinct geographic regions with considerable differences. The regions are shown in figure 5.1 on the following page.

Note that these regions are ethnographic regions, defined on the basis of the culture of the people living there, and not administrative regions. Only Samogitia has at any point been an administrative region.

Aukštaija means The Highlands, and is the region where traditional brewing has survived the best in Lithuania. Most of the interesting Lithuanian breweries are located here. Several of the towns in this regions are home to clusters of interesting breweries, such as Panevežys, Pakruojis (of which Jovarai is a suburb), Pasvalys, and Biržai.

Unfortunately, the region is not particularly easy to get to, requiring the use of either bus or rental car. Beware that in the smallest towns people are not necessarily welcoming of strangers, and that some of the brewers in this region do not want visitors. Many of them speak no English. So for travels in this region using a guide may be wise.

The town of Biržai is particularly famed for its beers, even though there aren't actually that many breweries in the town. Its reputation may derive from the presence of traditional home brewers, but this is



Figure 5.1: Lithuanian regions (from WikiMedia commons, modified by the author)

not known for certain.

Žemaitija literally means The Lowlands, and is known in English as Samogitia. This region has a somewhat different history from the rest of Lithuania, and was not under central control when the state was founded in the 13th century. Over the centuries it was repeatedly traded to the crusading orders, then regained. Originally, traditional beer was much more closely associated with Samogitia than with the other regions, but today little of that beer culture survives.

There are a few traditional breweries in Samogitia, but almost nothing is known about them. The main brewery in this region is Gubernija, which is a regional brewery.

Lithuania Minor was conquered by the crusaders very early, and remained outside Lithuanian control until 1923. For centuries it was part of Prussia, and was largely German-dominated. The main brewery in this region is Švyturys, which was originally founded by an ethnic German in what was then part of Prussia. There are a few other breweries, of which nothing is known. Most of the population in this area fled or was expelled to Germany at the end of World War II, so no farmhouse brewing traditions have survived in this area. Also, while it was part of Prussia there were strict limitations on beer brewing in the countryside, which means there probably was not much farmhouse brewing tradition to begin with.

Suvalkija, also known as Sudovia, contains Lithuania's second city, Kaunas. There is a cluster of breweries in Kaunas, the main ones being Kauno Alus and Volfas Engelmann. In beer terms this is not the most interesting region.

Dzūkija, also known as Dainava, is the region that surrounds¹ Vilnius. The huge territories to the southeast that were once part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania are also often considered part of this region. Agriculture in this region was generally poor, so the beer culture has also been weaker here. Vilnius was gradually polonized during the union with Poland, so in the last few centuries it has not really been a very Lithuanian city.

Traditional brewing is correspondingly weak in this region, but since the capital is located here, a number of breweries have been

¹Vilnius itself is generally considered a separate region, but we'll treat the two as one here.

established here anyway. The main one is Vilniaus Alus, but there are also a few brewpubs.

Chapter 6

The breweries

There are 75 breweries in Lithuania at the time of writing, and more are appearing all the time. I cannot cover them all here, as there are many I know nothing whatever about. This is an attempt to provide at least minimal descriptions of the main breweries.

6.1 Farmhouse brewers

These brewers produce beer in the traditional way, often using their own inherited yeast. Many of them do not boil the wort at all, and ferment in open tanks at high temperatures, and the result is beer that is very, very different from other beers. All of the beers produced by these brewers could be described as *kaimiškas*, and must surely be among the rarest and most unique beers on earth.

You should not leave Lithuania without trying one of these beers.

6.1.1 Ramūno Čižo

A very small brewery in a barn in Dusetos, where Ramūnas Čižas and his daughter brew traditional Lithuanian village beer using techniques, equipment and yeast passed on from his grandfather. He sticks closely to traditional techniques, using no thermometers or clocks when brewing. Instead, he judges the temperature with his fingers.



Figure 6.1: Ramūno Čižo Alaus Darykla, Dusetos

He brews one keptinis and one kvass (see 2.5.5 on page 27), roughly 25,000 liters per year. These are true traditional beers and seeking them out is very highly recommended. Unfortunately, the kvass is not commercially available, except for visitors to the brewery.

His keptinis can usually be found draft at Alaus Namai in Vilnius, and also at a bar/restaurant called Akivarai, in Jakšto gatvė 5. It's also available in Kaunas in a pub, name unknown, near city hall square.

6.1.2 Jovaru Alus

A very small brewery in Jovarai, run by Aldona Udrienė, who is known as “the queen of Lithuanian farmhouse brewers”. She, too, comes from a family of brewers. Both her grandfather and father were brewers. She decided to follow in their footsteps and started the brewery in 1995. She says her recipe is 130 years old, and that she does everything in the old way. She does not boil the wort. The beer ferments at 29C for two days, then is aged for another five days. After that it's good for 20 days.

The brewery makes two kaimiškas beers (one with honey). The Jovaru Alus, also sold as Jovaru Šnekutis, is the classic among Lithuanian kaimiškas, and an absolute must-try (see 2.5.1 on page 25). The Su Medum (honey) beer is also worth a try. Their beers can be found at Šnekutis and Bambalynė in Vilnius, as well as Smuklė Alaus Sėpnas and Blue Orange in Kaunas.

The brewery accepts visitors in a tasting room. Opening hours were reportedly 09-14. You should probably call ahead to be sure.

6.1.3 A. Grigonio

A small brewery in Jovarai, just a few houses away from Jovaru Alus, making beer in traditional Lithuanian styles, on a slightly larger scale, using ancient home brewing techniques. The current brewer is the fourth generation of brewers in the family. Their beers are very hard to find, and keep poorly. Have been observed in Bambalynė in Vilnius. In 2014 they also opened a pub and beer shop near the brewery. The easiest place to find their beers might be at fairs and festivals in Lithuania, or even sometimes abroad.

6.1.4 Linkuvos Alus / E. Mozūro

A small farmhouse brewery in the small village of Linkuva, near Pakruojis. They use family yeast in the same way as Jovaru Alus. Apparently the resulting beer divides opinion, as it is extremely rustic and not enjoyed by everyone.

Very hard to find. Appears to be available at A. Benešiuno in Pasvalys, and nowhere else, except perhaps at the Kaziuko Muge fair in Vilnius.

6.1.5 Apynys Alaus Darykla

Small, single-person brewery in the Vaišvydavas district of Kaunas. They produce a few true farmhouse ales, most of which have been certified by Fondas as being authentically traditional. The only hops used in these beers are Lithuanian wild hops from the forest. The beers are only available at the brewery and at traditional fairs.

Take care not to confuse them with the other, less traditional, Apynys (see 6.3.5 on page 58).

6.2 Traditional microbrewers

These breweries spring out of the farmhouse brewing tradition, but are scaled up and modernized to various degrees. These breweries still brew highly distinctive Lithuanian beers, often very close to the traditional style, and most of them are worth seeking out.

6.2.1 Su Puta

Started in 1991 in Paliūniškis, Su Puta (meaning “with foam”) is now run by the brothers Arturas and Raimondas Gurai. Their father was a home brewer, and they still use his recipes. They have, however, modernized, and now produce with more modern equipment and on a larger scale, but still use the ancestral yeast. Their beers are all good, and worth seeking out.

Unusually, most of their beers are fermented at lower temperatures, except for the Senovinis. All the beers are unpasteurized.

The beer can be found in many bars in the Panevežys region, and can also be purchased from a combined bar and take-away shop in the brewery itself. The brewery is in Paliūniškis, about 10km from Panevežys. The beers have also been observed in Alaus Namai, Bambalynė, Alynas, and Alaus Kolonėlė in Vilnius.

6.2.2 Davra

Started in 1993 in the private home of the owner, brewing in wooden tubs, using straw filters and other traditional techniques. In 2005 they started a limited company and established a bigger and more modern brewery in Pakruojis. It's still family-owned and quite successful. They started out as very small, but have grown to produce about 720,000 liters a year.

All their beers are unpasteurized and naturally carbonated, and brewed with water from their private well. The beers are Lithuanian in style and very distinctive. When fresh they are complex, subtle, and harmonic, but being unpasteurized their shelf-life is short.

The image of a young crow is a kind of symbol for the brewery, because crow hunting is a tradition in the region. And after the hunt there is always a celebration, and as the owner says, "what celebration can there be without beer?" They sponsored crow hunting festivals, and brewed a dark beer for it, called Varniukų (see 2.5.3 on page 26). It's a tamsusis which has been very successful, now making up roughly 60% of their production. It's highly recommended.

6.2.3 Piniavos

The brewery was started in 1990 just outside Panevežys by Vidmantas Perevičius, who is still the owner and main brewer. His grandmother brewed a beer that was famous in the region, and in the summer of 1989, her brother passed on to Perevičius the recipes and knowledge of brewing. The brewery builds on that family tradition of brewing, and carries on the traditional techniques.

Their beers are definitely Lithuanian in style, and very unusual. When fresh they are absolutely outstanding, and highly recommended. In 2010 their Raudonyjū Dobilų (red clover) beer, using red clover

and raspberry leaves, was given culinary heritage status by Fondas. The Seklyčios, see 2.5.2 on page 25, is a particular standout.

Their beers can usually be found in Bambalynė in Vilnius, but also in Alaus Namai and Šnekutis. Smuklė in Kaunas may also have their beers. The best place to sample them is Prie Uosio in Panevežys, which serves them fresh on draft.

6.2.4 Kupišķio

Started in 2005 in Kupiškis, this brewery claims to brew in the old traditional ways, and from the taste of the beers that seems right. Note that the brewery logo says Kupiškėnu, but the formally registered name of the brewery is UAB Kupiškio Alus.

All their beers are in the traditional styles, and they use open fermentation, plus sometimes odd ingredients like roasted walnuts. Their keptinis is a must-try, as is their Salaus Alus, which is a true gem when in good condition. See 2.5.6 on page 27. They brew an absolutely outstanding beer for the iki supermarket chain called Kupiškio UKIS Tradicinis Alus. Unfortunately, Kupiškio beers have not always had the most consistent quality.

The beers can reliably be found in Bambalynė in Vilnius, but also in Šnekutis in Vilnius, as well as in Špunka in Klaipėda and Smuklė in Kaunas. They also brew an excellent beer specially for the iki supermarket chain.

6.2.5 Butautu Dvaro

A small brewery in a manor house near the Latvian border, producing good-quality farmhouse-style beers. Not much is known about them.

They also have a series where local traditional home brewers brew their own recipes on Butautu Dvaros brewkit. These beers have easily recognizable labels with the name and photo of the brewer. These beers are also of high quality and very much worth trying.

Their beers can be found in Bambalynė and Šnekutis in Vilnius. Apparently, it's also been found in Auchan in Poland.

6.2.6 Astravo

The Astravo brewery started in 1991 in Biržai under the name Ponoras, but a few years ago changed their name to Astravo. They started out on a very small scale, but have gradually scaled up production. Today they use lager yeast for their beers. The quality of their beers has been variable.

Their beers can be found in Bambalynė and Alynas in Vilnius, and recently Lithuanian supermarkets have taken in their two main beers.

6.2.7 Tarušku

Started around 2000 in the village of Trakiškio, near Panevežys by Darius Vizbaras. Best known for their Kanapinis beers. Later they also brewed Kanapių, with toasted hemp seeds, which caused bureaucrats to ban it, providing free PR for the brewery. Today the ban has been lifted, and the beer is easy to find. They also have a “Ruginis” made with rye.

Their beers have become more available recently, both in Vilnius bars, and in some Lithuanian supermarkets.

6.2.8 Miežiškiu

Co-located with Tarušku, separated only by a wall, but with a different philosophy. Instead of playing around with special ingredients, Miežiškiu produces true traditional beers. Their Bravoro Šviesusis and Bravoro Tamsusis are both outstanding examples of Lithuanian farmhouse ale.

The beers have had very limited distribution, but have recently been found in Bambalyne in Vilnius, and in some supermarkets.

6.2.9 Alaus Purslai

Founded in 1992 by Saulius Alešiūnas as a single-person brewery named after the brewer. The brewery has gradually improved their equipment and scaled up, buying a completely new brewkit in 2001. Took the current name in 2002.

They used to make a very good šviesusis called “Gintarine Puta”, but for now they only make stronger beers for the local Panevežys pubs.

6.3 Modern microbreweries

These breweries are small, and produce interesting beers that are worth seeking out, but they are further removed from the Lithuanian farmhouse tradition. Some, like Joalda, started as farmhouse brewers, but have since moved quite far away from the original tradition.

6.3.1 Dundulis

Dundulis is a more recent brewery with the unusual feature that they have two physical breweries. One is Širvenos Bravoras, located in Biržai, and the other is Panevežio Alus in Panevežys. They are perhaps the closest Lithuania has to a modern craft brewer. They produce beers in lots of different styles, and often in foreign styles. They are not very traditional, but the beers are of very high quality, and highly recommended. They brew batches of roughly 10,000 liters, using a wood-fired kettle.

They brew the first Lithuanian IPA (Humulupu IPA), and an outstanding Czech-style pilsner called Ledzukas. Their black Labas Vakarais is also worth trying, as is the Moko Maukas made by heating the mash with hot stones. Dundulis has a habit of releasing new beers every other month, so by the time you visit Lithuania there will likely be completely different beers on offer.

The beers can be found in many places, especially in the Špunka bars, but also at Šnekutis, Bambalynė and other places.

6.3.2 Joalda

A small brewery in Joniškėlis officially opened in 1994, but had been producing semi-legally since the late 80s. They produce beers mostly for the local region, but recently more of their beers have shown up in



Figure 6.2: Donaldas Prašmutas (right), brewer at Vasaknu Dvaro; left Don Russell

the Vilnius region. The brewery uses an unusual fermentation technique, where the wort is warm-fermented for three days, before being cooled and cold-fermented for a couple of weeks.

Their Karpiu Dvaro has been observed at Alaus Namai and Šnekutis in Vilnius, and the Joniškelios Respublikas likewise.

6.3.3 Vasaknu Dvaro

A good-sized brewery in a rebuilt mansion in Vasaknos, currently producing only one šviesasis, of excellent quality. The brewery and brewing methods are modern, but the result is recognizably Lithuanian, and truly delicious.

Can be found at Leičiai Alinė and Alynas in Vilnius.

6.3.4 Leičiai bravoras

Started in 2012 by the owners of the Bambalynė bar. Initially they were a so-called “gypsy” brewer, having their beers brewed by other breweries, but in early 2014 they opened a physical brewery in a brewpub near Bambalynė. The beers are kind of eclectic without being obviously traditional in any way. Quality has varied quite a bit.

The beers can be found in both Bambalynė and Alinė Leičiai, plus in the brewpub with the same name.

6.3.5 Bravoras Apynys

A new brewery in Kaunas, started by a former employee of Kauno alus, at the moment making only two beers. One is the Green Monster IPA, an American-style IPA, and another is Ažuolo, a more Lithuanian beer. Their beers can occasionally be found in Avilys in Vilnius.

Note that they are not to be confused with the other, very traditional, Apynys (see 6.1.5 on page 52), also in Kaunas. There used to be a brewpub named Apynys in Kaunas, so for a short period the city had three breweries all named Apynys. Thankfully, the brewpub changed its name to Avilys.

6.4 Regionals

These breweries are bigger than the microbrewers, and for the most part less Lithuanian in character, except Rinkuškiai and Vilniaus Alus. The quality of their beers is generally high, and all are worth trying.

6.4.1 Biržu Alus

An industrial brewery in Biržai in northern Lithuania, producing about 5 million liters a year. Marketing material says the brewery was established in 1686, but the continuity with the present brewery is not clear. In any case, the cellars of the current brewery are certainly centuries old. It’s a lager brewery producing beers of reasonable quality using traditional lager brewing methods and lagering times of 15 to 90 days. As their marketing material proudly announces, they don’t



Figure 6.3: Entering Biržu Alus

use high gravity brewing (meaning, brewing a stronger beer and then diluting it).

Particularly worth looking out for are their Širvenos, for including fresh green peas in the grist, which is filtered in bottle, and unfiltered draft. Also look out for Grafo, an unpasteurized and very nice lager, which is only available draft. Their 1686 jubilee beer is also very good, and there are indications that they will soon bring out a naturally fermented 15% beer.

6.4.2 Gubernija

A brewery with a rather checkered history, starting with its founding in 1680. The brewery has been in the same building since 1680, but with a few gaps in continuity. The latest incarnation opened in 1999. Gubernija brews a large range of quality beers. They use both wheat and barley, and produce both lagers and ales. These are not very Lithuanian in flavour, but many of the beers are quite good.

Their beers are exported, and can be found abroad. In addition, their beers have been observed in Alaus Namai, Alynas, Bambalynė, and Špunka in Vilnius.

6.4.3 Vilksmergės

Originally founded as a German franchise after independence, Vilksmergės was acquired by Kalnapilis-Taurus in 2011. The beers are generally lagers, drinkable, balanced, harmonic, and good without being very traditional or unusual. Their kvietinis is worth trying.

6.4.4 Kauno Alus

Founded in 1888, nationalized under the Soviets, and then privatized after independence, Kauno Alus brews mostly lagers, but also a couple of Baltic porters. Their most interesting beers are perhaps the “gyvas” beers.

The beers have been observed at Bambalynė in Vilnius, and of course in Kaunas, as well as in Klaipėda and Warsaw. They can also be found in most supermarkets.

6.4.5 Vilniaus Alus

A relatively big producer of beers in many different styles, some of them closer to lagers, and others with many spices. How traditional these are is not clear, but some are very good. The “Senojo Vilniaus” (that is, “Old Vilnius”) series is perhaps their most interesting. They also have two 14% beers, confusingly called 13 Statiniu, which are also worth trying. See also the Senojo Vilniaus Tamsusis su Prieskoniais, described in section 2.5.4 on page 26.

Their beers are very easy to find in Vilnius, including in supermarkets, and they are also exported.

6.4.6 Rinkuškiai

Established in 1991 in a private house in Biržai by the son of one of the most famous home brewers in Biržai together with two brothers. The brewery has expanded and modernized and is today the fifth biggest in Lithuania with 4% of the market.

They brew a large and constantly changing range of beers in a wide variety of styles, including both ales and lagers. Most of the beers are recognizably Lithuanian in style, while others are more ordinary lagers. Quality is generally high.

Their beers are not difficult to find, and appear in all the well-known craft beer bars, and also in places less dedicated to quality beer. They also export to Latvia, Estonia, and the US.

Note that the brewery tap in Biržai is described by visitors as a very pleasant place.

6.4.7 Raudonu Plytu

A newcomer on the Lithuanian scene, this is the “craft brewing” arm of Švyturys. They brew test batches on a small 100l brewkit to develop recipes, but the final beers are brewed at the normal Švyturys brewery. The Raudonu Plytu (“red brick”) label is then used to release more innovative beers in styles other than the usual ones.

So far, the following beers have been released:

- Beganti Kopa, a witbier at 4.5%.

- Ungurio Kojos, an amber lager at 5.3%
- Nežinomas Krantas, a Belgian dubbel at 6%.
- Bocmano Ūsai, an American-style IPA at 6%.

None of these beers are really terribly interesting. The beers are easy to find.

6.5 Industrials

6.5.1 Švyturys

The biggest brewery in Lithuania, founded in 1784 in Klaipėda, and acquired in 1999 by Carlsberg. Utenos Alus was merged into Švyturys in 2003, but still brews in Utena. They are an industrial lager brewery of no particular interest. They brew a couple of darker beers, a couple of bocks, and a wheat beer. Their most interesting beer is perhaps Švyturys Nefiltruotas Raw, which is an unfiltered beer.

Their beers can be found everywhere, even abroad.

6.5.2 Kalnapilis

Kalnapilis, or more formally Kalnapilis-Tauras, was started in Panėvėžys in 1902 under the name Bergschlösschen, but changed to the present name (which is a translation of the original German) in 1918. It was nationalized under the Soviets, and only became a private company again in 1992 after independence. It was acquired by Danish Royal Unibrew in 2001, and the smaller brewery Tauras was merged with them. Today Kalnapilis has roughly 25% of the market in Lithuania.

Kalnapilis is an industrial lager brewery of the international type and doesn't really brew any beers of special interest. Their beers can easily be found in bars and shops all over Lithuania.

6.5.3 Volfas Engelmann

Opened in Kaunas in 1853 by Raphail Wolf, acquired Engelmann's brewery in the 1890s, making it J. B. Wolf-Engelmann. In the early

20th century it was one of the biggest breweries in Lithuania. It was nationalized under the Soviets, and in 1967 it was renamed Ragutis. After independence it was privatized under the name Volfas Engelmann (basically the Lithuanian form of “Wolf Engelmann”), and acquired by Pilsner Urquell in 1997, then sold to Finnish Olvi in 1999.

Today they produce beers under four brands: Volfas Engelmann, Fortas, Ragutis, and Horn (Ragutis actually means “drinking horn”). They mostly brew lagers of no special distinction, but their Volfas Engelman Imperial Porteris is not bad.

Their beers can be found in lots of bars and supermarkets without any difficulty. They also export to the UK.

Chapter 7

Beer places

This chapter gives a brief overview of the best places to find Lithuanian beer. Coverage is sort of limited, since I have only been to Vilnius and Panevežys. I hope to be able to expand it with time.

In general, Lithuanian bars and restaurants have generous opening hours, opening every day before lunch and closing late at night. Children are as a rule welcome to any place where food is served.

7.1 Getting around

Public transportation is well developed in Lithuania, with both train and bus services to most towns of any size. So to get to any of these towns that will work fine. The difficulty is that hardly any of the breweries of interest are located in the towns. You can try using taxi.

Renting a car is possible, and since the places of interest are packed into a relatively small area, there is not really that much driving involved. The roads in those parts are kind of narrow and not top quality by western standards, so some people, used to American-style highways, will find this unnerving. There is also the issue of who should drive after a tasting.

Most breweries have tasting rooms and will receive visitors, but not all of them. If you want to visit them on your own you will have to call ahead and schedule a tour or tasting. Unfortunately, very few



Figure 7.1: The Great Courtyard of Vilnius University

of these breweries have employees who speak English, which makes things difficult. If you know someone in Lithuania who can translate that will make things much easier.

The easiest and most efficient way to get around is to take an organized tour. The most prominent alternative, operating out of Vilnius, is [BeerTourism.lt](http://www.beertourism.lt). They can do tours of just one day or more days, and can attempt to tailor the tour to your wishes.

In Biržai there is another tour arranger which conducts tours of four local breweries: Irutė Varzienė. See <http://www.birzai.lt/index.php?2128713581> for more information.

7.2 Vilnius

Vilnius is definitely the Lithuanian city with the widest beer selection, and as such is the obvious place to start. However, only a fraction of

the interesting Lithuanian beers are available here, because Vilnius has only been Lithuanian again since 1945, after centuries as a Polish and Jewish city. So the farmhouse brewing tradition does not exist in the region around Vilnius, and the beers must therefore be “imported” from further north.

As a result, the beers are often not as fresh as they could be, and so the beers are often available in better condition elsewhere. The city still remains the single place with the most Lithuanian beers in one location.

The map of Vilnius (7.2 on the next page) shows the location of the most central beer places. The numbers refer to the numbered sections below, so Šnekutis Stepono is 1, Bambalynė is 2, and so on.

7.2.1 Šnekutis Stepono

The name means “talker” or “chatterbox”, a reference to the way beer sets conversations going. It was the first bar in Vilnius to focus on Lithuanian farmhouse beers, and was opened in 2007 by Valentas Vaškevičius, who still runs the place. With his huge curling mustache Valentas is instantly recognizable, and you can see his face on much marketing material for Lithuanian beer.

The bar is a down-to-earth place for locals in the southern part of Vilnius Old Town, with a number of simple wooden benches and a basic bar with lots of steel beer kegs behind it. Some bottled beers are available in a fridge next to the bar. Usually there are 12 beers draft, and another 10 bottled, all of them Lithuanian countryside beers. Countryside food is also available at very reasonable prices.

Address: Šv. Stepono gatvė 8, Old Town. **Opening hours:** 12-23.

7.2.2 Bambalynė

A small, classy brick cellar bar in Old Town Vilnius selling only Lithuanian craft beer in bottles. It’s both a take-away shop and a bar, and also sells some cured meats. They have a big selection that constantly changes, and this is one the best places to find interesting Lithuanian beers. An excellent place to have a chat over beers, or relax with a book. Very highly recommended. The main drawback is the music,

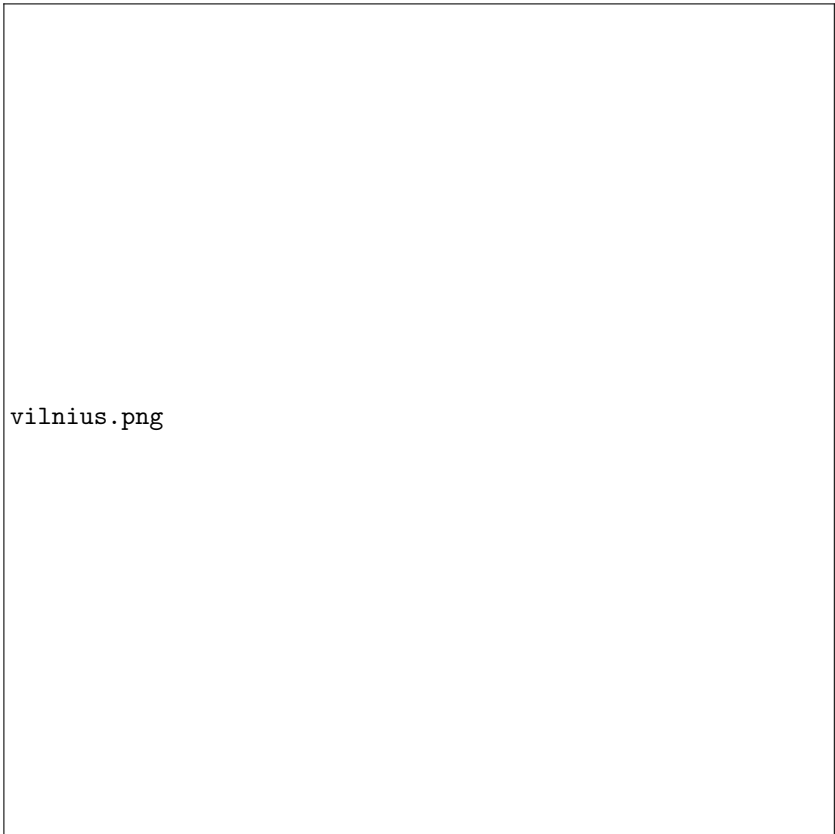


Figure 7.2: Map of Vilnius



Figure 7.3: The bar at Šnektis Stepono



Figure 7.4: The shop part of Bambalyne

which can be loud and low quality, depending on the bar staff on duty. There is no food, except quality Lithuanian cured meats and hot snacks. One thing you may want to try is the “kibinai,” a dish associated with the ethnic minority called Karaim.

The name is a pun. “Bamb Alynė” literally means “belly button”, but “Bambalynė” means “a place with many bombs”. That is, “bamba” (literally “bomb”) is Lithuanian slang for 1-liter PET bottles of beer.

Address: Stikliu gatvė 7, Old Town. **Opening hours:** 11-22

7.2.3 Šnekutis Užupio

A small wooden shack in the Užupis part of Vilnius, with wooden logs for seats and wooden tables, crammed with enough rustic paraphernalia to fit out a small museum. There’s also outside seating in the tiny garden. Under the same owner as the other Šnekutis, and serves a similar range of beer, although it’s never exactly the same. Good, rustic food at very reasonable prices. The music is mostly Lithuanian folk music, and the clientele mostly locals. Very nice, and a must visit in Vilnius.

Note: Because of difficulties with the landlord, this bar will move to a nearby location some time in the spring of 2015. The new address is not known at the time of writing.

Address: Polocko gatvė 7a, Užupis. **Opening hours:** 10-22

7.2.4 13 Statinių

A small, cozy bar on two floors, owned by Vilniaus Alus, in small backyard off Pilies Street in the Old Town. The bar looks like a countryside beer stall, and sells beer for drinking on location, or to take away in PET bottles. Food is just bar snacks.

They serve both their own beers and beers from other small Lithuanian breweries.

Address: Pilies gatvė 6, Old Town. **Opening hours:** 12-23



Figure 7.5: Šnekutis Užupio



Figure 7.6: Špunka

7.2.5 Špunka

A tiny bar in the Užupis part of Vilnius. The flagship bar of the Dundulis brewery, which is why all of their 7-8 draft beers are from Dundulis. The best place in Vilnius to sample Dundulis, since the beers are fresh and very well treated, with a separate cooling room kept at optimal cellar temperature. They also serve a number of bottled beers from other breweries, including a good number of imported craft beers. Pleasant music and good service. There is no food, other than an outstanding plate of traditional Lithuanian cheese.

The name refers to a kind of pin which in older times was used to control the pressure in wooden casks. They also have another bar with the same name at Kęstučio Gatvė 55 in north-west Vilnius. The district is called Žvėrynas, and is famous for its wooden architecture.

Address: Užupio gatvė 9, Užupis. **Opening hours:** 12-23

7.2.6 Alaus Namai

A student bar in the concrete basement of an office building, with a nice outside seating area in summer. Plays rock music for a mostly young crowd. Good, cheap food, and a menu of very carefully selected quality Lithuanian beers. There is an English menu with descriptions of all the beers, but unfortunately it can be a bit confusing as it doesn't always clearly specify the brewery.

Highly recommended to visit because of the beer selection. It can usually be relied on to have Ramunas Čižas Keptinis on draft.

The name means "Beer House".

Address: Alberto Goštauto gatvė 8, New Town. **Opening hours:** Mon-Wed 12-24, Thu 12-03, Fri 12-05, Sat 15-05, Sun 15-23.

7.2.7 Alinė Leičiai

A restaurant in Old Town Vilnius with a historical theme, serving good, traditional Lithuanian food, as well as beer cuisine. It has the same owners as Bambalynė and the Leičiai brewpub across the street, and so serves a good range of Lithuanian quality beers, some of them draft, and even from cask. Some of the draft beers cannot be found elsewhere. The restaurant itself is a bit dark, but the outdoor patio



Figure 7.7: Alinė Leičiai



Figure 7.8: Decorations at Šnekutis Mikolajus

at the back is very nice (and always full in summer). The beer menu, unfortunately, is deeply confusing.

Many of the beers here are in the Leičiai range established by the owners.

Address: Stiklių gatvė 4, Old Town. **Opening hours:** 11-unknown

7.2.8 Šnekutis Mikolajus

The third and most recent Šnekutis bar, opened in 2013. A relatively large place in a modern building, with simple wooden benches and tables, decorated with farm implements and beer memorabilia. It's a lively place, with lots of locals chattering away over their beers. Serves good, simple home-style cooking, with a good number of beers both draft and bottled.

Address: Šv Mikolajus 15, Old Town. **Opening hours:** 11-23

7.2.9 Alaus Kolonelė

A modern, rather basic bar and take-away shop with a big draft selection that is a mix of interesting Lithuanian beers and foreign imports. They have more beers in bottles. The selection includes quite rare beers, so the place is probably worth seeking out. The name translates as “Beer Filling Station”, as in “Gas Station”.

Address: Rinktinės 55, north Vilnius (just outside map). **Opening hours:** Mon-Fri 12-23, Sat-Sun 10-23.

7.2.10 Alynas

A modern, trendy bar in the centre of modern Vilnius decorated with photos of beery subjects on the walls, serving a reasonable range of interesting Lithuanian beers. They also sell a number of Lithuanian cheeses and cured meats. Part of a chain, with bars all over Lithuania.

Address: Jogailos gatvė 6, New Town. **Opening hours:** Unknown.

7.2.11 Alaus Uostas

There seems to be a bar serving beer specialities at Vilnius airport. If nothing else, it has beers from Rinkuškiai. Unfortunately, it’s located outside the security check. It’s on the third floor. I have not been able to find out anything more, so more information would be very much welcome.

Address: At Vilnius airport. **Opening hours:** Mon-Fri 0830-2200, Sat-Sun 0830-2130.

7.2.12 Būsi Trečias

Slightly grungy and dark brewpub on two floors serving a couple of own brews together with fairly basic food. The beers are not bad at all, but not very Lithuanian. In fact, the beers are brewed from malt extract made in the Czech Republic. The name means “You’ll be the third.”

Address: Totorių gatvė 18, Old Town. **Opening hours:** Sun-Thu 11-23, Fri 11-02, Sat 11-01.

7.2.13 Prie Katedros

A cellar brewpub and restaurant on the main street in Vilnius, serving unremarkable beers and fairly good food.

Address: Gedimino 5, Old Town. **Opening hours:** Mon-Wed 11-23, Thu 11-24, Fri-Sat 11-01, Sun 12-23.

7.2.14 Belmontas

Enormous beer pub in an old mill next to the Vilnia river out in the Belmontas nature reserve. There are several buildings with seating, as well as several huge outside seating areas. Service and food are both good. It's possible to walk here via Užupis.

Note that while Belmontas used to brew their own beers, at moment the beers are made for them by Biržu Alus.

Address: Belmonto gatvė 17, outside Vilnius proper. **Opening hours:** 12-24.

7.2.15 Tores

This brewpub used to be in Užupis in Vilnius, but in 2013 moved about 5 km outside the center of Vilnius. It's a nice, modern wooden building in a forested area, with plenty of outside seating. Very classy and upscale, but not expensive by western standards. The service and food are both very good. There is no beer menu, and the beers are in fact not mentioned anywhere, so you will have to ask what they have available. They seem to usually have 2-3 own beers on.

The beers are not traditionally Lithuanian in style, and are not the most remarkable, but this is still the best of the Vilnius brewpubs.

Take a taxi to get there.

Address: Guriu gatvė 10, on the outskirts of Vilnius. **Opening hours:** Mon-Fri 11-23, Sat-Sun 12-24.

7.2.16 Bravaria

A brewpub chain with outlets in the Akropolis malls in both Kaunas and Vilnius, serving German-style beers and hot snacks like German sausages, hamburgers, and paninis.

Address: Ozo gatvė 25, on the outskirts of Vilnius. **Opening hours:** Sun-Thu 10-24, Fri 10-00, Sat 10-

7.2.17 Leičiu bravoras

Brewpub under the same owners as Bambalynė and Alinė Leičiai, just across the street from the latter. The Leičiai line of beers is now brewed here. Little more is known about this place at present.

Address: Stikliu gatve 4, Old Town. **Opening hours:** Mon-Sun 17-01.

7.2.18 Dėvėti vyrai

A new, hip and fashionable place just south of the old town. Seems to have good food. They are tied to the Dundulis brewery, and have a number of their beers draft, plus a mostly imported bottled selection. Gets very busy on weekends.

Address: Sodų gatvė 3, **Opening hours:** Mon-Sun 17-01.

7.2.19 Žvėryno Špunka

Another Špunka in northwestern Vilnius, on the other side of the Neris river from the center. A rather rough brickwork design, with stools and small tables, plus seating around the bar. Affiliated with Dundulis just like the other Špunka and presumably with a similar selection. The building is of historic interest, having been the stables of a former noble family's town house, and later brewery tap for the now long-defunct Alytaus Daiga and Vilniaus Taurus breweries.

Address: Kęstučio gatvė 55. **Opening hours:** Mon-Sun 16-23.

7.3 Trakai

The old capital of Lithuania has a number of interesting sights, and is just a 30-minute train ride from Vilnius. It's a very small place with a limited night-life, but there is one bar of interest.



Figure 7.9: Trakai island castle

7.3.1 Gyvo Alaus Krautuvėlė

In a small wooden house next to the main road, quite far south of the castles and other attractions. It's a reasonably-sized bar, selling Lithuanian microbrew both for take-away on bottle, and for consumption on the spot. The selection did not seem that unusual.

The location is on the route from the railway station to the castles, so if you travel by train it's a good place to wait for one of the not terribly frequent trains to Vilnius.

Address: Vytauto gatvė 79.

7.4 Panevežys

There is a big cluster of small brewers around Panevežys, but the town itself is of little interest.

7.4.1 Prie Uosio

A true gem of a bar, located in a small, traditionally decorated wooden house in the center of town. Fairly small bar inside, which is all naked wood, with a big outside seating area. Serves snacks like boiled peas, pig's ears, kepta duona, and baked cheeses. The crowd is friendly locals, mostly a bit older, known to break out into spontaneous song.

The bar is owned by the Piniavos brewery, and only serves three draft beers from that brewery. These are outstanding kaimiškas, in perfect condition. The people working the bar are actually the brewer's family, and with a bit of luck you can meet the brewer himself. Definitely the best place to sample Piniavos beers.

If you bring a key (any kind of key) the bar staff will lend you a hammer and a nail so you can nail it up on a tree outside the bar, to show your respect for Lithuania.

Address: Birutes Gatvė 8.

7.4.2 Gyvo Alaus Krautuvėlė

A student bar right next to the bus station, kind of grungy and loud, but in a friendly way. Serves about 8 Lithuanian farmhouse ales draft,



Figure 7.10: The bar at Prie Uosio

and another 20 in bottles. The selection has no real surprises or rarities. No food.

Address: Savanoriu a. 4a.

7.4.3 Špunka

A small shop selling bottled Lithuanian microbrew, and also bottling on the spot from draft towers. There are a few stools along the wall if you want to drink a beer in the place. The selection is pretty big, since they also have some quality imports, but there isn't really a whole lot here that you cannot find in Vilnius.

Note that next door is Tauros Loftas, a big, industrial-looking bar also owned by Dundulis, but selling mostly beers from Panevėžio alus (formerly known as Tauras). One of the two Dundulis breweries are actually in the same building.

Address: Senamiesčio Gatvė 29.

7.5 Pakruojis

This village is home to many of the most interesting breweries, but again the selection of local bars is not that great.

7.5.1 Traktierius

Restaurant in Pakruojis Manor, a historical manor now turned into a hotel, which serves traditional local cuisine, as well as local traditional beer. Very likely this means Jovaru Alus or something similar.

Address: Karcemos gatvė, **Opening hours:** Sun-Thu 12-20, Fri-Sat 12-22.

7.5.2 Brewery taprooms

Two of the local breweries: Jovaru Alus and A. Grigonio have taprooms that receive visitors. These are strictly speaking not in Pakruojis proper, but in the southwestern part of town, which goes under the name of Jovarai.

7.5.3 Rozalimas Alaus Baras

A tiny brewpub in a small wooden house in a village a few kilometers south of Pakruojis. Their beers are more modern than the most traditional farmhouse ales, but good. The pub itself seems more interesting than the beers, from the descriptions of visitors.

Address: Pievu gatvė 1.

7.6 Pasvalys

This town has a cluster of interesting breweries, but few places where you can drink the beers are known. More may exist.

7.6.1 A. Benešiuno

Ordinary blue-collar bar at the end of the bus station, serving 4-6 local ales, for consumption on premises or to take away in bottle. Very cheap, and very friendly staff. Odd opening hours: 06-20, every day. Appears to serve some seriously rare beers.

Address: Taikos gatvė 8A.

7.7 Moletai

A tiny resort town in north-eastern Lithuania.

7.7.1 Gintaro

An excellent little brewpub in a private home. The beers are not very Lithuanian in style, but very good. They serve excellent pizza as well as kepta duona.

Address: Inturkės gatvė 51.

7.8 Biržai

A city in northern Lithuania. Historically very important, as the seat of a branch of the powerful noble Radzivil family. Today it's best

known as the “Lithuanian capital of beer”, both for the local breweries and for the tradition of homebrewing.

7.8.1 Rinkuškiei Restoranas Alaus Kelias

Very nice and classy restaurant in rustic style with lots of wood, right next to the Rinkuškiei brewery. A big place on two floors. Serves very good food. Has a good selection of Rinkuškiei beers, plus a kvass.

Address: Alyvų gatvė 8

Hours: Mon-Thu 12-22, Fri-Sat 12-23, Sun 12-22

7.9 Festivals

Kaziuko Mugė, literally “little Casimir’s fair”, is an old street fair in Vilnius dating back to the early 17th century. It’s traditionally held on the Sunday closest to March 4, the day St. Casimir died. St. Casimir was a Grand Duke of Poland-Lithuania around whom an important cult developed after his death in 1484. The fair takes place in the Old Town in Vilnius, from Gediminas Avenue down Pilies Street all the way down to the Vilna river opposite Užupis.

At the fair can be found all sorts of craft products like clothes, toys, souvenirs, foodstuffs, and beer. Several of the traditional breweries often have stalls here where their products can be tasted. This can be a unique opportunity to try some of the more rare beers and breweries, as some of the brewers who come here do not sell their beers in Vilnius bars and will not receive visitors.

Pakruojis Beer Festival A beer, music, and craft festival in Pakruojis in the north, started in 2013. It’s held annually the first weekend in August. In 2014 it had 71 draft beers from 24 brewers. It focuses on traditional brewers, with opportunities to talk to them and try their beers. Accommodation in the region sold out well in advance of the festival in 2013, so if you plan to go there make sure to book early.

Žmogšala An annual “exotic beer and ale” festival held each year the last Saturday in February in Vilnius. It features both Lithuanian and imported beers.

Chapter 8

Where to learn more

As I said in the introduction, there are precious few other sources of information on Lithuanian beer in English, so if you really want to learn more you are pretty much required to go to Lithuania yourself. Which is not a bad idea in any case. Lithuania has lots to see and experience, without being overrun by tourists. You don't have to be interested in beer to enjoy a trip to Lithuania.

If you do go to Lithuania, I strongly recommend Columbia J. Warren's "Experiencing Lithuania: An Unconventional Travel Guide", which is a self-published book available both in paperback and for Kindle. It covers language, culture, and general travel in a clear and accessible way, and is a very useful source of information about Lithuania. Make sure to get the second edition from 2013.

For historical background, I strongly recommend "A History of the Baltic States", by Andres Kasekamp. It's scholarly, readable, and very systematic. A different point of view can be found in Norman Davies's excellent "Litva", which is really a part of a longer book titled "Vanished Kingdoms". A more literary, and more vivid, account focusing on Vilnius is Laimunas Briedis's "Vilnius: City of Strangers".

One source of information you can enjoy at home is the movie "Vys par to alus" (But for the beer), which has an English soundtrack. You can order it from <http://www.alutis.lt> for 15 Euros. It's 50 minutes long and features interviews with key Lithuanian brewers like Ramūnas Čižas and Aldona Udriene.

The web site tikrasalus.lt is mostly in Lithuanian, but has some information in English, too, such as a list of Lithuanian beer places.

For those who can read French there are also Martin Thibault's blog posts at <http://lescoureursdesboires.com/guides-de-voyage/les-paturages-brassicoles-de-la-lituanie-presentation/>

Vidmantas Laurinavičius published a guide to Lithuanian breweries called "Aludarių žinynas" in 2009 and 2011. Two new editions, one in Lithuanian and one in English, are planned for early 2015.

And that's about it.