The Ottoman Imperial Brewery and its Legacy: Multiculturalism, Hedonism, Conservationism

5 February 2020
Series,The Taproom

The Taproom is a monthly series that explores the rich history of all things beer. It is curated by **Pavla Å imková**.

*Featured image: A beer-garden visit, ca. 1950s (source: Tarih Vakfı, reproduced here with kind permission)

By **Malte Fuhrmann**

Turkey is home to some of the most impressive ancient and medieval archaeological remains of the Mediterranean, but its government does not have a good reputation for its conservation policy. The flooding of Allianoi, a recently discovered sanatorium from the Roman period near Bergama (Pergamon) in 2011, and the ongoing flooding of Hasankeyf, an ancient settlement and medieval capital on the Tigris, both for dam projects, have provoked protests but, unfortunately, no general outrage. Many minor alterations, such as the “creative” restoration of ancient churches now used as mosques (to make their Christian origins less visible), go unnoticed except by experts and locals. However, a completely different issue recently brought many architects, journalists, and revellers up in arms: the first industrial brewery on Turkish soil is in danger of partial demolition. All oppositional newspapers and news portals featured this story prominently when it became public in early September 2019. As during many similar conflicts, residents of Turkey frame this as a clash between two different ways of life; an ascetic worldview enforcing prayer and abstinence onto the general populace, and a hedonistic one supporting openness and other impious forms of frivolity. The former brewery has become yet another battlefield for this conflict.

The grounds of the Bomonti Brewery in Istanbul no longer form an undivided whole. After production was abandoned in 1991, the machines were pillaged for scrap metal. The adjacent former beer garden to the south has been filled by a nondescript building belonging to Mimar Sinan University. The production premises on the western half of the site were demolished to make way for a Hilton high rise. The central buildings, however, with their 1890s historicist façades imitating Central European castles have, after lying dormant for two and a half decades, recently come back to life as a highly popular commercial and cultural center, hosting cafés, restaurants, an art gallery, a concert venue, and a successful craft brewery. Also still standing are the buildings at the eastern end of the premises: huge, derelict, but nonetheless architecturally impressive early twentieth-century structures. Although these buildings—the old vat, malt and barley-cleaning buildings, as well as the silo—were included in a 1998 decision to protect the brewery as industrial heritage, the city conservation authority earlier this year approved their transfer from the Treasury to the Directorate of Religious Affairs. The Directorate intends to tear them down in order to construct a multi-storey car park topped by a student dormitory, an exhibition hall, and a mosque. The conservation authority has approved the plan, but both the Chamber of Architects and the District Municipality have announced that they will challenge the decision in court.

The popularity of the cultural center and micro-brewery is no doubt one of the reasons for the public outrage over the impending demise of the old brewery buildings. It becomes even more understandable if one takes into account the significance of the area as the prime site in establishing beer production in Istanbul, as well as its place in public memory. While beer is the unchallenged, favorite alcoholic drink of today's Istanbulites, it was almost completely unknown only two hundred years ago. In the multireligious and multiethnic Ottoman capital of the early nineteenth century, wine and especially the aniseed-flavored liquor *rakı* (also known as *oúzo*, *mastika*, or *arak*) were the staple drinks, while beer is mentioned only as a possession or product of still rather small expat communities.

While dilettante historians have dedicated much effort to identifying the first brewer to have produced beer for the wider Istanbul population, the point is moot. Brewing is no rocket science: we know that by at least the 1830s, the equipment and ingredients were locally available. Thus, brewing started in a decentralized, unregulated, small-scale, and often short-lived way. Expats from across the Mediterranean made up the lion's share both of the brewers and the customers, while many locals met the beverage with scepticism. In the 1830s, an immigrant brewer from Austria complained that

she was arbitrarily evicted three times; the first time because her Armenian neighbor complained about the smell, the second time after her German customers had gotten into a fight with the Greek patrons of a wine bar, and finally because she had supposedly erected her bar-cum-brewery adjacent to a Muslim saint's grave. Two French brewers were reportedly even physically attacked in 1855.

Brewing activities in the vicinity of the now endangered brewery supposedly began with a man named Kosmos. Not a foreigner, he is said to have migrated from what is now Panagjurište in Bulgaria and to have possessed extensive land near Feriköy, at the time a remote and hilly region beyond the city. Probably, he took up brewing as a side activity to other forms of agricultural processing, before the increasing popularity of the drink from the mid-nineteenth century onward made him concentrate on this product. By 1883, we see two other names, Grein and Schaffer, probably Austrian or German immigrants, also producing beer in the same area. The game changers though were the Bomonti brothers. The two Swiss citizens, with the support of the German embassy, obtained a concession for the capital's first steam-powered beer and ice production, which began in 1893. Foreign observers, who had until then habitually slandered the Ottoman breweries, had to concede that Bomonti Beer was competitive with the imported brands in taste, but a lot cheaper. Sultan Abdulhamid II appointed the Bomontis official purveyors to his court. To further support the trend towards the consumption of local brands, the Ottoman government and the Public Debt Administration in 1902 lowered the beer production tax by 30 percent. Output in the following years developed exponentially. From 1,741,404 kg in the year 1902–1903, it grew eightfold to 14,481,729 kg in 1911–1912. Bomonti accounted for almost 57.8 percent of all Ottoman beer production.

Local newspapers, such as the *Servet-i Fünun*, took pride in the fact that Istanbul had a serious local contender on the beverage market and recommended the Bomonti Beer Garden, which, due to its location on top of a cliff, enjoyed cool breezes even in the height of summer. Going to the beer garden became a question of prestige. Such visits and the beverage itself became associated with a modern outlook on life. If you were seen in the beer garden, it meant that you were open for overseas tastes and influences and not inhibited by tradition. Also, the mixed-sex societies of the beer gardens stood in contrast to the usually male-only patrons of *rakı* taverns, wine bars, and coffeehouses.

More factories, as well as apartment houses and schools, were soon founded along the streets running toward the brewery, so that it was no longer apart from the city proper. The neighborhood thrived and eventually became known only by the name

“Bomonti.” Even today, streets carry names such as “Barley Juice Street,” “Beerhouse Street,” or “Street behind Bomonti.” However, with the apogee of the brothers’ success, at the dawn of the twentieth century, beer increasingly became the object of criticism. Nationalists denounced it as being alien to the Ottoman people, whose customary drink they claimed to be *rakı*. Increasingly, both sellers and consumers of beer were criticized as being not only unpatriotic, but also antisocial and adherents of a superficial and phony Europeanness.

Following World War I and the formation of a revolutionary nationalist parliament, its ascetic faction briefly introduced a total prohibition. When Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) and the other hedonists among the nationalists gained the upper hand, beer was legalized once more, but nationalized. A new law in 1928 required that all companies producing food in the Turkish Republic were listed at a Turkish stock exchange. As had been common practice during the Ottoman Empire, the Bomontis had listed their company in Switzerland. Now they were forced to sell out to a Turkey-based joint stock company which had been formed in expectation of the new law. When the new company’s ten-year license for running the Bomonti factory was about to expire, Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, on behalf of his brother-in-law, intended to have the license extended. However, he was confronted and eventually dismissed from office by President Atatürk, who himself had taken a keen interest in the development of a brewery at Ankara’s Forest Estate. Bomonti’s license was not renewed and its production was turned over directly to the State Monopoly on Alcohol. After new private beer producers, Efes and Tuborg, had been licensed following World War II, the State Monopoly brewing site at Bomonti declined and eventually closed its doors in 1991.

Despite the rather sad story of its end, Turkish beer history has in recent years been the subject of keen interest and nostalgia. Middle-aged Istanbulites can still remember outings to the Bomonti Beer Garden. More recently, a new Bomonti beer has kindled longing for the fin-de siècle brewery, although it is merely a brand of the producer Efes, having no direct link to the production site on the windy hill in central Istanbul. As the central government (and from 2011 until recently, the Istanbul Municipality) had rigorously supported abstinence, the return of beer consumption and nightlife to Bomonti came at just the right moment, when Istanbulites were willing to explore new venues in the city. This also helped to raise interest in the history of parts of the city that until recently lay beyond their mental map. The conservation of the city’s industrial heritage and in particular the further exploration of its multicultural beer history might profit from this heightened awareness in the future.