

The Amsterdam pub guide



**By
Ron Pattinson**

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Introduction

Amsterdam has an absolute stack of pubs - 1200 of them for only 700,000 of us. (I don't mean to rub it in, but I'm lucky enough to be a resident of the Birmingham of Holland, as no-one calls it.) I make that one pub for every 583 people.

You can't possibly expect me to describe them all, and I'm not going to. This is my selection. Arbitrary, bigoted, left-handed - these adjectives, and more, appear in the English dictionary. Where was I? - objective, inclusive, perfect (*see previous note*).

Some said I was a crazy taking the arduous task of compiling this guide upon myself. "Aaaaaaaggh mmmmmnnnnngggggg" was my reply. Any subsequent ordeals, I underwent willingly. Just remember this: if you make no use of these pages, my boys will have suffered in vain. Do you want the anguish of those tender young souls on your conscience? Do you?

The dynamic nature of a modern post-industrial economy means that my research will never end. Pub openings (and pub closures) require me to spend long hours researching in bars. At least that's what I tell everyone.

Sadly, the choice of beer in Amsterdam doesn't match the number of its pubs. Many bars (though, happily a diminishing number) still only sell a single beer - draught pils. In a British or Belgian pub you can expect to find a minimum of 10-15 beers on sale. In Amsterdam, students and yuppies will be your drinking companions if you've got a choice that big. Here's a thought to bear in mind: more 90% of all beer sold in the Netherlands is pils. If you take this fact into consideration, the beer selection offered by Amsterdam's pubs doesn't look quite so mean.

These are the pubs that I would recommend you visit in Amsterdam. Not the best, the oldest, the trendiest, or the ones with the most or best beer. No. These are where I would take you, should you say: "Do you know a decent pub?". This is my choice of bars and pubs selling at least one beer worth drinking. Usually more. Beers that is. Unless it's a pub I like. And there's loads of them I like for no discernible reason. You work it out.



Index

Copyright © 2008 Ron pattinson.....	2
Part 1: Dam Square – Leidseplein.....	5
Part 2: Zeedijk/Nieuwmarkt.....	25
Part 3 de Jordaan	58
Part4: De Pijp.....	72
Part5: Amsterdam East.....	87
Part 6: Amsterdam South.....	102
Part 7: Amsterdam west.....	121
Part 8 Weteringschans – Utrecht straat.....	141
Part 9: The Rivierenbuurt.....	153
Maps.....	159

Part 1: Dam Square – Leidseplein

Café Belgique

Gravenstraat 2,
1012 NM Amsterdam.

Tel. 020-625 1974

<http://www.xs4all.nl/~phj>

Opening hours: Mon -

Thur: 12:00-01:00

Fri - Sat: 12:00-03:00

Sun: 14:00-01:00

**Number of draught
beers:** 8

**Number of bottled
beers:** +40

Regular draught beers:

- [Moinette Brune](#)
(8.5%)
- [La Chouffe](#) (8%)
- ['t Ij Vlo](#) (7%)
- [Blanche de
Namur](#) (4.5%)
- [Brand Pils](#) (5%)

Food: Snacks.

Prices: draught beer

€1.85 - 3.50. Café Belgique is a tiny pub behind the Nieuwe Kerk. (My front room is bigger. Constructing a fullsize replica has often crossed my mind.) The carved wooden counter, glass shelves and gleaming brass taps lend a turn-of-the-century air which draws in many an idle passer-by. Maybe they would be just as attracted to my house, if my wife were to become temporarily insane and allow me turn my dream into reality.

Ignoring your fellows is not an option in somewhere this size. It has to be pretty empty for you not (quite literally) to be rubbing shoulders with your neighbours. Alone, beer-loving and English-speaking? Nowhere else (Damstraat excepted, where that old Amsterdam street call "Coke, ecstasy, heroin" can still heard) is it easier to strike up a conversation.



Despite its location in tourist central, Belgique draws in a good share of locals; suits from the Beurs, shoppers from Nieuwedijk, artists from their attics. The laid-back vibe is helped by some of the best background music you'll hear in Amsterdam.

The decoration is appropriately beery, consisting mostly of the old enamel advertising signs which used to adorn the exterior of Belgian pubs. Sadly, most of the breweries have

long disappeared, demonstrating the damage caused to Belgium's rich beer culture by the buy-em-up then close-em-down philosophy of large brewery groups. The tiny size of the bar and the prominently positioned stairs lead many to assume that there must be more rooms upstairs. But don't be fooled: there are only two seats upstairs, one for men and one for women. In the summer months there are a couple of tables on the pavement outside, when the police aren't having one of their bizarre occasional crackdowns on 'illegal' terraces.

The beer selection, predictably enough given the name, is mostly Belgian and, while not the largest, is reasonably varied, offering an example of most major styles. Amongst the draught beers in particular, there are seldom two of exactly the same type. Notably, it is the only regular draught outlet for **Vlo**, a beer specially produced by the local 't Ij brewery for the beer shop De Bierkoning. It's one of a handful of truly top-class, original Dutch beers and is highly recommended both by myself and anyone else who has the vaguest idea about beer.

A few years ago the number of draught beer taps was increased by two and this has allowed the number of occasional beers to increase. There's usually a new draught every two weeks or so and these have included such rarities as **N'ice Chouffe**, the outstanding winter beer from La Chouffe. In the Winter, La Trappe Quadrupel usually graces one of the beer taps at some point.

Overall, it's one of the best specialist beer bars in Amsterdam and amongst the top in the whole country. Not to be missed.

(The photo of the interior of Belgique was taken by Arjan, a far better photographer than I. His surname I don't know, I'm afraid. He's one of the barmen. Tell him Ron sent you - or, better still, that you really like his photo. It is very nice, after all. The password is: "Amersfoort mafia".)

Rating: *** Public transport:** Tram 1, 2, 5, 6, 13, 14 to Dam Square

Het Schuim Spuistraat 189,
1012 VN Amsterdam.

Tel: 020 - 638 9357

Opening hours: Sun - Thur 11:00-01:00

Fri - Sat 11:00-02:00 **Number of draught beers:** 6 **Number of bottled beers:** +-10 **Regular draught beers:**

- [Leeuw Pils](#) (5%)
- [La Chouffe](#) (8%)
- [Blanche de Namur](#) (4.5%)
- [Palm](#) (5%)
- [De Koninck](#) (5%)

Food: Meals, snacks.

Prices: vaasje €2.00, La Chouffe €2.75, Duvel €3.75.



Schuim is a decent-sized pub in a rather bland new building, not far from Dam Square (or the Bier Koning, Amsterdams best beer shop, which is just around the corner on Paleisstraat). I suggest you take this photo along with you for identification purposes, as there isn't really any sign (OK, there is a tiny one, but I challenge you to spot it on your first visit) to give away the pub's name.

The style of the interior is unashamedly modern, but with enough effort and thought put into it come up with the something attractive

and comfortable. The furniture is a slightly jarring mixture of garishly coloured low armchairs and heavy stiff wooden tables and chairs.

It also acts as a gallery and the walls are hung with changing collections of paintings. These range from being quite good to putting you off your beer, but if there's anything you particularly hate you can at least reassure yourself with the thought that it will be gone in a couple of weeks.

With part of the university directly opposite, it, unsurprisingly, attracts large numbers of students. But don't let this put you off too much, as there is also a reasonable number of normals, even some over 30.

A combination of the disastrous bar counter design (pillars almost totally hide the barstaff from view) and the quaintly surly, uncooperative sloths standing behind it, has created a level of service way below even Amsterdam's usually crap level. If you're in no hurry, seeing just how long it can take to purchase a single beer, can be good fun. An attempt to buy a round at 11 o'clock on a Friday night doesn't raise quite as many laughs

Very little has changed in Schuim, except for the paintings. You can see how busy it was on the afternoon of my visit, yet it still took two barstaff 5 minutes to serve me. Look at the photo of the bar and you can see where desperate drinkers have started chewing the pillars out of frustration. I fully understand.

One addition - and one of the few places you'll find the pub's name - are brass fretwork lampshades. Nice. A bit hippy, but nice. Where's my camera so I don't need to trouble the thesaurus again.



A bizarre pricing policy sees La Chouffe good value , but Duvel expensive. I've tried, but I can detect no logic behind the prices. It all adds to the anarchic charm. Bitburger Pils has gone, but there is still a guest tap, often serving an Ij beer.

Oh no. One of the paintings is starting to look quite good. I don't remember consuming any mushroom dishes today. There has to be something wrong with my senses. I had best just give the beers in my notes a quick count - 1 ... 2, 3 ... That can't be it. Could the cause be:

- my eyesight is failing
- my taste has been lost
- there's very clever lighting in here

That's all the possibilities, except ones with space aliens or dragons. Or maybe there's one more possibility, no matter how improbable

Despite several crap features, I still really like Schuim. It has personality. An often annoying, but occasionally disarming, one.

What else can I say about Schuim? Oh yes, it's Xavier Hollander's favourite Amsterdam bar (at least that's what she claimed in the local paper, Het Parool). It's also a "smoking" bar. Spend any length of time here and you'll realise that my mates don't just call it "Scum" because the real name is too hard to pronounce...

Rating: ** Public transport:** Tram 1, 2, 5, 6, 13, 14 to Dam Square

In De Wildeman Kolksteeg 3,
1012 PT Amsterdam.

Tel: 020 - 638 2348

<http://www.indewildeman.nl/>

Opening hours: Mon - Thur
12:00-01:00

Fri - Sat 12:00-02:00

Sun Closed **Number of draught
beers: 18 Number of bottled
beers: +-150 Regular draught
beers:**

- [Konigshoeven Dubbel](#)
(6.5%)
- [De Koninck](#)
- [Guinness Stout](#)
- Strongbow Cider



Food: Snacks.



Half way between Centraal Station and the Dam, De Wideman is tucked away in a small alley which has the pedestrianised Nieuwedijk at one end and Nieuwezijdsvoorburgwal at the other.

For those with any sense of aesthetics, I would recommend access from the Nieuwedijk. You might otherwise have to look at the inept and inappropriate green glass office block that disfigures the corner with the Nieuwezijdsvoorburgwal. Not without reason is this compendium of uninspired modernist cliches one of the most hated

buildings in Amsterdam. I would gladly pay to have it dynamited, if only I wasn't as broke as a christmas present on Boxing Day

Originally the tasting room of a defunct distillery to the rear, the conversion of the premises to beer bar has been done remarkably tastefully. The atmosphere of distillery sampling rooms (see Wijnand Fockinck) has been successfully preserved, especially through use of the trademark green woodwork.

The former use of the building is shown by an attractive tile decoration celebrating the



distillery's 250th anniversary in 1940. In the main room, one wall is almost completely taken up by a carved wooden bar. They certainly need it to be long to fit in all those beer taps. Best of all, for those of you wanting to be able to try your beer in an unpolluted atmosphere, they have a no smoking room (usually pretty empty, which I suppose says something depressing about people - see the photo to the right).

What is being served through the taps at any one time varies greatly, but is mostly Belgian with the odd German, Czech or even French beer thrown in for variety. Occasionally a barrel of genuine British cask-conditioned beer is dispensed by gravity on the bar.



The good contacts built up between Amsterdam and Bamberg have seen Franconian beers frequently appearing on draught. This can be in the form of a small cask on the bar from which beer is dispensed by gravity. If you like quality German beer, ask to see the German beer list. The best ones don't appear on the list standing on every table. There are always a few Franconian gems to try.

Several times a year they hold special beer weeks. For example, in May when the usual range is replaced by meibock beers, or a British-themed week when several cask-conditioned beers are served.

The bottled beer selection is much less Belgian dominated than the majority of Dutch beer bars. Available are about 40 Dutch beers, 20 German and 10 British. Amongst the Belgian beers are representatives from all the Trappist breweries, including Achel and Westvleteren, though obviously supplies of the latter cannot always be guaranteed.

Rating: *** Public transport:** Tram 1, 2, 5, 6, 13, 14 to Nieuwezijds Kolk