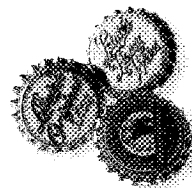


Lost in America by Paul Lukas

Ale in the Family

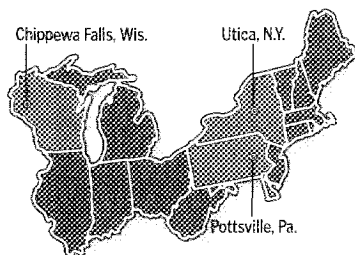
Family-run breweries—the few that remain—offer visitors a trip back in time.



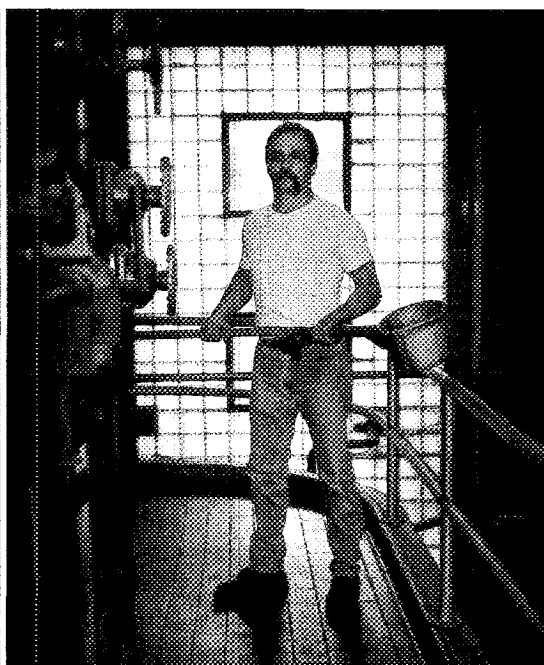
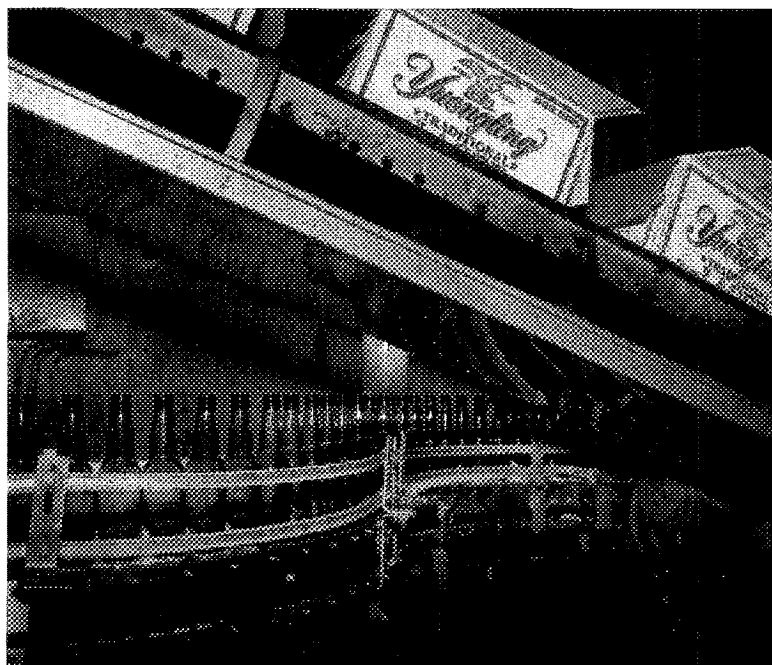
LIKE MOST COLLEGE STUDENTS, I drank my share of beer back in the day. A lot of that beer was Utica Club, a regional brand made by the F.X. Matt Brewing Co., a small, family-run operation in Utica, N.Y., not far from the upstate university I attended. I figured anybody anywhere could drink Budweiser or Miller, but by drinking Utica Club I was getting a taste—literally—of indigenous upstate culture.

The Matt brewery is still run by the Matt family, which makes it something of an anomaly. The country was once dotted with small family breweries—particularly in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, where German immigrants brought their Old World brewing expertise, and beer as we know it today, with them to America—but only a few remain. Part of this is simply due to the attrition rate of family businesses. A recent study found that just 35% of family-run enterprises are successfully handed down from the first generation to the second, and only 15% make it to the third. By the time you reach the fourth generation, as the Matt brewery has done, the figure is less than 1%. Loss in factors like Prohibition, which wiped out scores of breweries, and the fierce market consolidation in the beer industry—Anheuser-Busch, Miller and Coors control 80% of the business—and Matt's survival starts to seem heroic. The plant is also a rare window on an earlier time, when brewing was one of many immigrant trades that transformed various regions of America.

Fortunately, several of the remaining regional family brewers offer plant tours. Large corporate breweries conduct tours too, of course. But a behemoth like Anheuser-Busch (whose fine tour I recommended here in September 1998), with plants all over the country, can't possibly provide the sense of local history and community heritage that the smaller facilities do. One of the best places to experience this is in Pottsville, Pa., home of America's oldest brewery, **D.G. Yuengling & Sons** (Fifth and Mahantongo Sts.; 570-628-4890; www.yuengling.com), which has been making Yuengling beer on the same site since 1831, when founder David G. Yuengling brewed with water from a local spring and kept his kegs cold in nearby caves. The



The tour of America's oldest brewery, D.G. Yuengling & Sons in Pottsville, Pa., brings you right to the factory floor.



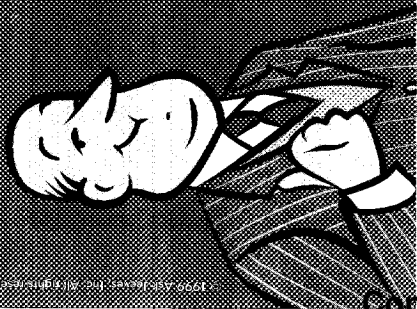
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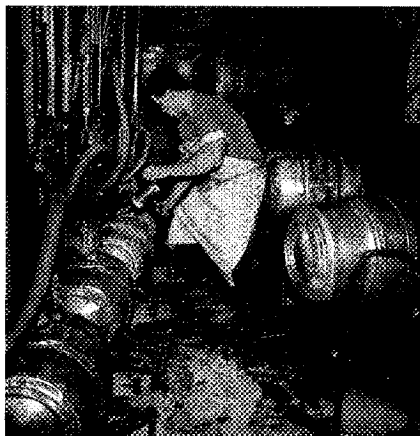


SAVING & SPENDING

Lost in America *continued*

brewery is housed in a series of landmarked brick buildings that now form the centerpiece of a hilly residential neighborhood, where the heady smells of hops, barley and yeast waft through the air.

Yuengling is available in only a handful of Mid-Atlantic States, but the fifth-generation company, run today by the



The old factory exudes a palpable sense of history.

founder's great-great-grandson, is justifiably proud of its place in American brewing history, and it offers a dynamite tour. Stops along the way include the brewhouse (where grain, hops and water are mixed in huge, ancient copper kettles), fermentation tanks, grain storage areas and shipping docks. The old buildings, their hallways lined with vintage photos, exude a palpable sense of history, and the tour guides do an excellent job pointing out beautiful period details, like a magnificent 1888 stained-glass window in the brewhouse. But the real treat is the bottling plant, where you get to go right down on the factory floor, so you're only a few feet away from the bottles as they zip through the washing, filling, labeling, capping and packing stations. It's a sensational finish to a first-rate tour.

Wisconsin was once synonymous with beer, but almost all the breweries are gone now. The loss goes beyond mere jobs or economics—brewing was central to Wisconsin's sense of identity, and as the breweries have gone, so has the regional pride and ethnic heritage that once came with a trade stretching back generations. For-

tunately, one of the state's oldest breweries is still going strong: the **Jacob Leinenkugel Brewing Co.** (1 Jefferson Ave., Chippewa Falls; 715-723-5557; www.leinie.com), whose Leinenkugel beer remains popular in the upper Midwest. Founded by a Bavarian immigrant in 1867 and now operated by his great-great-grandsons, the facility includes a brewhouse built in 1890, a malthouse dating to 1877 and a huge 1890s barn where delivery-wagon horses used to live. The tour is similar to Yuengling's, but there are some unique features, like the original spring, in use until a few decades ago, that Jacob Leinenkugel tapped to brew his beer, and a beautiful copper trough where visitors can see and smell the wort (a pre-fermentation mixture of water and grain mash with a wonderful toasted aroma) as it moves through the brewhouse. The history embodied here, and the pride with which it is displayed, amounts to a resonant reminder of the role brewing once played in this region.

All of which brings us back to Utica. The city isn't usually regarded as a beer stronghold, but 12 breweries were operating there in 1888, when German immigrant F.X. Matt founded the West End Brewing Co. Operating on the same site and known today as the **F.X. Matt Brewing Co.** (Court and Varick Sts.; 800-690-3181; www.saranac.com), the firm still makes Utica Club, although its biggest brand is now Saranac, which launched in 1985 and is available throughout the East. The most striking aspects of this tour are the massive copper brewing kettles, which glint with a dazzling patina, a chance to handle the malted barley and hops used in the brewing process and a video retrospective of the wonderful Utica Club "talking beer stein" commercials of the '50s and '60s.

All three breweries have small company museums featuring old cans, bottles and related memorabilia (including samples of the nonalcoholic products they manufactured during Prohibition) and all three conclude their tours with an informal tasting session. And, happily, all three say they plan to keep their operations in the family. **ES**

Travel writer Paul Lukas has always preferred domestic beer over imported.