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What the  
Hell  
am I  
Drinking?

Joe Sixpack

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## Helles

**P**ale, yellow lager...*yawn*. It's as ordinary as white boxer shorts.

Try telling that to the Munich brewers who gathered a few weeks after their beloved Oktoberfest in 1895 to gripe about this newfangled brew called Helles Lagerbier. That kind of talk would have had you facing the wrath of Hans and Fritz, perhaps wearing those pointy *Pickelhauben* helmets, clicking their heels and railing about the purity of their dunkel beer.

"I take the view," spouted the owner of the Augustiner Brewery, as wonderfully related by the Bavarian Brewers Federation, "that the reputation of Munich beers has been greatly damaged by the brewing of pale beers, which has done nothing but to serve as an unnecessary advertisement for Pilsner beers."

Ah, yes, those blasted Pilsners, the plague of the Bohemians. Heading toward the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the crisp, refreshing golden lager was filling glasses in cafes across Europe. The Germans—traditionalists to a fault—believed at first that it was a passing fad. All they had to do was stand together, ignore the threat from the east, continue brewing their dark, fuller-bodied beers that generations of Munich brewers had perfected over three centuries.

But the ranks broke. In 1889, Eugen and Ludwig Thomas, both of whom had trained in Pilsen, had begun pouring something called Thomas-Hell ("hell" is German for "bright"). In the summer of '95, Spaten—the famed brewery of Gabriel Sedlmayr, the man who invented amber Oktoberfestbier—began pouring its own Helles Lagerbier.

This “unnecessary advertisement,” of course, would become its own, distinct style—one that would emerge as the world’s most popular.

Munich Helles, at first glance, is almost identical to Pilsner. Clear and blond they both sparkle with carbonation that rises to a creamy, white collar of foam. On a hot and muggy day, you just want to dive in and soak it up.

But a whiff and a swallow says you’ve got something different. Where Pilsner bites your tongue with the spice of Saaz hops, Helles fill your mouth with soft, mellow malt. Tettnang, Hallertau—they’re in there, but only for balance not bitterness, for Munich’s water does harsh things to hops. The finish is slightly sweet but certainly not cloying. It would be hard to find a more perfectly balanced beer.

Indeed, around the world, breweries have mimicked the style, often with palate-numbing results. Miller, Beck’s, Singha, Corona, Molson, Red Stripe—they’re all basically dumbed-down Helles, bright and crisp and balanced, yes, but with little distinctive character. Kind of like those white boxer shorts.

You want to know what an authentic Munich-style Helles taste like, you need to enjoy it on tap or from a fresh bottle from a brewery that you can trust not to screw it up with corn or industrial shortcuts. A perfect Helles—say, Weihenstephaner Original or Penn Gold—is rich and

## Helles

**Aroma:** Clean and sweet with light hops.

**Flavor:** Somewhat sweet and malty, soft, very clean and refreshing.

**Bitterness:** 16-22 IBUs.

**Strength:** 4.7-5.4% abv



slightly bready, clean and smooth. You know you've got one in your hand when each sip urges you to take another.

Take a long pull, and consider the events of November 1895.

Looking back, you could say that those recalcitrant brewers were simply out of step with the world's changing tastes, that their uber-traditionalism—still predominant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century—has stunted German beer culture, that the insistence of hewing to centuries-old brewing guidelines has allowed other countries—Belgium, America, even Italy—to grab the spotlight with new, exotic styles, that without progress, you die.

Or you could say, dammit, if only the Munich brewers had stood strong, we might have been spared the scourge of Michelob Ultra.



## Helles Checklist

- 7 Stern Wiener Helles (Austria)
- Altenmünster Metzger Helles (Germany)
- Altstadtthof Helles (Germany)
- Atwater Hell Pale Lager
- Augustiner Bräu Edelstoff** (Germany)
- Ayinger Jahrhundert Bier (German)
- Barons Lager (Australia)
- Borbecker Helles Dampfbier (Germany)
- Cisco Summer of Lager
- Climax Hoffmann Helles
- Der Hirschbrau Neuschwansteiner (Germany)
- Ettaler Kloster Edelhell (Germany)
- Great Lakes Dortmund Gold
- Hacker-Pschorr Münchner Gold (Germany)
- Löwenbräu Original (Germany)
- Maui Bikini Blonde Lager
- Mecklenburger Bavarian Lager
- Moerlein Lager House Original Golden Helles
- Moosbacher Lager (Germany)
- Paulaner Original (Germany)
- Rosengarten Einsiedler Lager Hell (Switzerland)
- Saranac Helles
- Shiner 99
- Smoky Mountain Velas Helles
- Spaten Munchner Hell (Germany)
- St. George Lager
- Stiegl Goldbräu (Austria)
- Stoudt's Gold**
- Thomas Hooker Munich Style Golden Lager
- Three Floyds Gorch Fock Helles
- Victory Lager
- Weihenstephaner Original (Germany)
- Weltenburger Barock-Hell (Germany)

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