



# MUNICH BARFLY – DAS HOFBRAUHAUS

by John Brunton

## Beer.

THAT IS THE ONE SINGLE WORD THAT THE WHOLE WORLD THINKS OF WHEN THEY TALK ABOUT THE GERMAN CITY OF MUNICH. This is not just the venue for the famed Oktoberfest, a tumultuous jamboree that draws a staggering seven million people, it is, quite simply, the Beer Capital of the World. And for once, rather than recommend a little-known bar, lost down a romantic sidestreet, I have no hesitation, when it comes to Munich, to say that an obligatory first-stop for a foaming “stein” of beer must be the Hofbrauhaus, a legendary locale that proudly proclaims itself – with rather typical Germanic arrogance – as both the oldest and most famous brewery in the world. Don’t expect to wander into a quiet, intimate pub, as the Hofbrauhaus attracts a spectacular 20,000 customers a day! It can be a little intimidating, too, for the first time visitor. I

remember well, the first time I sat down in the vast Beer Hall, and tentatively inquired of the brusque, red-faced waiter, in my best German, if I could have “ein kleines Bier”, a small beer. He gave me an incredibly dismissive look, saying there was no such thing as a “small beer” in the Hofbrauhaus, and just proceeded to put down a huge one-litre “Mass” in front of me. My wife did not fare much better when she asked for a white wine, as even that is served here in large glasses filled with a quarter of a litre. But these are first impressions, and it really is worth persevering with a couple of visits more to this unique watering-hole, because seated at its tables, you can observe a total cross-section of Munich society, a slice-of-life that goes from loud, drunken university students to white-haired pensioners, still dressed in traditional “lederhosen” as if nothing had changed here since before the days of the Second World War.



Although the Hofbrauhaus is on every visitor’s guided tour of the city, it remains the quintessential Munich meeting point for its thousands of local regular customers. To understand its importance in daily life in the Bavarian capital, it is necessary to know a little of the history of this ancient establishment, which dates its foundation back over four centuries, to 1589. At this time, Bavaria was ruled by Duke Wilhelm IV. He was also known by the title of “The Pious”, but that didn’t stop him indulging in a passion for beer drinking, which he imported at great expense from the North German city of Einbeck. When part of his palace burnt down, he decided it was time that Munich brewed its own beer. A brewery was built inside the palace, and the Hofbrauhaus was born. At first, their renowned HB beer was only for royal consumption, but after 1610, the general public were graciously allowed to drink it too. The present Hofbrauhaus, which can seat 4,500 drinkers at any one time, was constructed in 1897. It was seriously bombed at the end of the last war, but has been so perfectly renovated today, that when customers sit down in the huge Schwemme, the historic beer hall that is the pulsating heart of the Hofbrauhaus, there is the feeling that nothing has really changed here since the Middle Ages. Ordering a beer in the Hofbrauhaus means taking part in an ancient ritual. Many of the regulars have their own precious beer mugs – known as a “Keferlohe” – locked away in the bar’s safe, and ceremoniously opened each time by the waiter. Once their mug is filled with amber

HB beer, there comes the traditional “Bayerischer Vorspeisentell”, speciality appetizers of peppery hot white radishes, sliced black bread with chives and a tasty pork pate, and a delicious hot pretzel. In the centre stage of the Beer Hall, a brass band belts out a medley of Bavarian folk songs, but don’t be fooled into thinking that this is a kitsch show put on for the tourists, as the people singing along, or getting up for a waltz, are invariably Munich locals.



The Hofbrauhaus also has a beautiful garden, under shady chesnut trees, and several smaller bars with evocative names like “The Hunter’s Bar”, “The Drinking Room”, “The Festival Hall”, and “The Fishermen’s Cellar”. But in my opinion, it is only under the towering arches of the central Beer Hall, the “Schwemme”, that you really feel part of this unique Germanic beer culture. And after you have experienced the Hofbrauhaus, the most pleasant surprise about Munich is that there is a whole host of other bars to discover, which are a million miles from hard-drinking beer halls. This is actually a cultured, fashionable city, with smart cocktail bars like Schumann’s and Havana Club, and



Das Hofbrauhaus, Am Platzl 9, Munich

elegant wine bars such as Weinstubl, where you can sample fine vintages from the Mosel, the Rhine and South Tyrol. And in these chic places, the waiter will never complain if you ask for “ein kleines Bier”.