

Beer today ... more positions than the Kama Sutra?

American beer drinkers have plenty of delicious options

If you want to get attention for your viewpoint, keep it simple. Speak in terms of good or bad, profit or loss, a trend for or against, up or down. People are talking that way about trends in beer, but I say it ain't so. Consider how many ways drinkers regard beer.

Some believe that the American way must always be best. In their ethic, to drink anything but Bud is to be a deviant. Many will never progress beyond that viewpoint. Let us call it Position Number One. You, being something of a connoisseur, thought that nobody loved Bud any more? Tens of millions do.

Others are equally sure that American can never be best: drink Heineken at all times. This is Position Number Two. You thought that nobody these days was impressed by Heineken? Millions are.

Such a dichotomy between xenophobia and national self-hate is not unique to the United States. I suspect it exists in most countries where people have the disposable income and freedom to make such a choice, especially in such a harmless arena as discretionary spending.

I thought for a moment that national self-hate was at work when I met Vinny the other day. I am forever meeting people like Vinny. I found myself chatting to him on a train, and he wanted to know my job. "You write about beer? Great! I love beer!! What do you think about Heineken?!"

I tried not to sound bored. "It is an okay beer, perfectly well made, but just a standard international, mass-market product." He looked disappointed. "So - you are the expert - what should I be drinking." There was not much point in my suggesting anything extreme. We were in the New York area, so I asked whether he had tried Brooklyn Lager. Now he looked puzzled.

"That's better than Heineken?" I told him I was not keen on the word "better" but that Brooklyn Lager was a far more interesting beer.

Vinny is an intelligent, lively, guy, whose job in national television should in theory mean a finger on the pulse of America. Yet he thinks Heineken is something special. Remember him next time you are about to generalise on the topic of public opinion.

On reflection, I think Vinny is a practitioner of Position Number Three: Bud with the boys or the ball game, Monday to Friday; something labelled "imported," in a green bottle, with the girlfriend at weekends. You didn't think people still behaved like that? Check out your neighborhood restaurant on Friday night.

Position Number Four leans toward speciality imports, exploring Samuel Smith's range from Pale Ale to blackest Imperial Stout, or Traquair House Ale; Belgian brews from Hoegaarden to Cantillon to Westmalle Tripel; Germans from a hearty Hefeweizen to a devastating Doppelbock. Some of these styles were made in the U.S. before Prohibition, but they were reintroduced here by my 1977 book "The World Guide to Beer." I therefore have a strong sympathy for Position Number Four.

The availability of these imports led first home-brewers and then a new generation of pubs, micros and revived regionals to emulate them.

Position Number Five is to discover that many of these styles, and one or two beyond, are made by the 1,000-odd craft breweries that have opened in the United States in the past two decades. Most of these beers are less expensive than imports, and quite a few have more character than the originals.

Position Number Six is to appreciate good beer, of whatever style or origin, and to choose according to the mood and moment. This is the position that many Americans are reaching. The beers that currently seem to be causing the most excitement are very sophisticated Belgian styles, whether made in Flanders or Wallonia; Florida or Wisconsin.

This does not sound like "going back to basics," a phrase trotted out by "Beer Guy" columnist Dan Neman the other day in the Times-Dispatch of Richmond, Virginia. I prefer the writing of another columnist in that slot, Lee Graves. The latter once told his readers that the battle for beer appreciation had been won on the playing fields of Yorkshire (where I broke my jaw as a Rugby League player).

"Beer Guy" Neman is less discerning. His recent article asked whether anything was as deliciously full-bodied as a Beck's (a Position Number Two beer). Well, yes, most of the beers that I have consumed in the last 20 years were more deliciously full-bodied than a Beck's.

Moving on to firmer ground, he asked whether anything was smoother or more complex than a Pilsner Urquell. That beer remains a classic, despite huge loss of character due to changes in its method of fermentation, but it does not travel well. In America, I am more excited to find a Stoudt's Pilsner, or its Pennsylvanian neighbor Prima Pils, from the Victory Brewing Company.

Pursuing his argument, he asked whether anything could beat the creamy smoothness of a Samuel Smith's Oatmeal Stout, adding "these are all old-established beers that have been consumed for a long time." Not true. Samuel Smith's Oatmeal Stout was launched in the 1980s, inspired by "The World Guide to Beer." It is a superb example of the style, but so are more recent interpretations such as those made by Californian breweries like Anderson Valley or Seabright.

Which would we rather have, he asks, a beer from a brewery hundreds of years old, or "some concoction thrown together by a former stockbroker..."?

He cites the claimant to being the world's oldest brewery, Weihenstephan. It makes excellent beers, but certainly not by the methods it used in 1040. When the German Beer Purity Law was promulgated, in 1516, it did not mention yeast. At that time, brewers did not realise their beer was being inoculated with wild yeast. In some parts of the world, it was inoculated with babies' faeces, or virgins' spittle. Meat was sometimes added as nutrient. A type of English ale was primed with a whole cockerel, a technique more recently used for one brew by Samuel Adams. Oysters were used in the Isle of Man long before there were any American micros. Seaweed as a fining, juniper as an anti-infectant, cherries for further fermentation and flavour? All very traditional. And Neman thought he was joking about liver 'n' raspberry beer in his article - published on April 1.

Indeed, I wish European breweries would maintain their best traditions. Many are discarding them with apparent relish. If I wanted to find a traditional Märzen-Oktoberfest, I would have to look harder in Bavaria than the U.S. Should I desire a true India Pale Ale, the style's country of origin, England, would have a hard time delivering; the American examples are far more assertive.

Beers made by stockbrokers? For years, the financial community completely ignored craft brewing, then - having discovered it at a derisively late stage - treated it as a scam that would make them millions. When it didn't, they loudly and persistently rubbished it, like spoiled children trying to smash toys with which they had become bored.

Whether you have been brewing for a thousand years or a hundred days, the love of beer has to come before the desire to perform sleights of hand, make millions, or play with toys. I am a writer and love beer, though I would never presume to make it professionally. Perhaps a stockbroker could love beer. Jerry Bailey was with the U.S. Agency for International Development and loved beer. He started a brewery in Virginia called Old Dominion. I wonder what he makes of Dan Deman's toy-smashing comment, "a few of the small craft beers are worth drinking, but none has reached greatness".

Worth drinking? I would bath in any of Jerry Bailey's beers, and gladly drown in Tupper's Hop Pocket Ale (designed for Old Dominion by a history teacher and his editor wife. They both evidently love beer).

Mark Stutrud was one of three substance-abuse counsellors who started breweries (his is Summit, in St Paul, Minnesota). Fritz Maytag, now famously of Anchor Steam, fell into the brewery (so to speak) while studying Japanese literature. Ken Grossman was a bicycle mechanic before he established Sierra Nevada. Geoff Larson worked in a goldmine and his wife was Marcy was a book-keeper before they began Alaskan Brewing.

Sitting at my keyboard, three minutes' walk from a pint of cask-conditioned Young's, and an impatient four minutes from a brewery-fresh Fuller's, I nonetheless cannot type the names of those American breweries without Proustian recall.

The brighter British ones seem to feel the same way. Back to basics? Dan Neman says the microbrew "revolution" is over. As Trotsky would have explained to him, it is a continuous, worldwide, revolution.

There has been brewing on the Young's site since 1531, and the present enterprise dates from 1831. Young's are famous for their bitter, but their intensely-hoppy Special London Ale and equally malty Old Nick survive because they have sold so well to U.S. beer-lovers. Their Chocolate Stout surely came in the opposite direction: inspired by Brooklyn's.

There has been a brewery on the Fuller's site for at least 300 years, and the current company dates from the 1820s. Fuller's are renowned for their much-copied Extra Special Bitter, but inspired by the new American brewers in their India Pale Ale and Honeydew.

The party is over, says Neman. I thought it was a revolution, Dan. You said in your article that we were now down to skirmishes like the Battle of New Orleans. The truth

may be closer to old Orleans. How are you going to get the boys back to the farm now that they have seen Paree?

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