

Foreign Frontier advances: Especially Russians and Americans

Where in Britain would you find, under one roof: beers as hefty as St Petersburg's whisky-ish Baltika Porter; as aromatically malty as the Czech Lobokwicz lagers, from a noble family that traces its history to the Holy Roman Empire; as tartly refreshing as Berliner Kindl Weisse wheat beer; as perfumy as Troubllette, brewed over a wood fire in the Ardennes; as intensely hoppy as Dogfish Head India Pale Ale, from Delaware; as chocolatey as Lion Stout from Sri Lanka; as fruity as Cooper's Sparkling Ale, from Australia?

"The Russian beers and the cask-conditioned Americans are big features this year," says Ian Garrett, manager of Bières Sans Frontières, the foreign section of the Great British Beer Festival. "We are very proud to have obtained some of those."

Something wrong, surely? Wasn't this beer festival created specifically to honour and promote British beers? It was, but it has also quietly been toasting the greatest beers from other countries since its early days.

Garrett first worked for Bières Sans Frontières 20 years ago, when the festival was held in Leeds. "That year, we had just one table, with about 15 beers," he recalls. The only ones I had tasted were Duvel and the Chimay Trappist range. The bar manager made me sample all of the others, so that I could at least attempt to answer questions from people who were trying to make a choice."

At a stretch, one can imagine that Belgian beers might be given a special dispensation in a festival otherwise devoted to British ales, Belgian specialities like those mentioned, and the winey Lambic beers, the Sour Red Beers of West Flanders, the spiced Saisons of Wallonia, are all cousins to our classic British ales.

The foreign beers from others countries are admitted on the basis that they are unpasteurised. There are some lagers among them, but even the relatively conventional examples are bursting with the aromas and flavours of malt and hops: potentially a huge shock to anyone whose idea of lager is Stella, Carling, Fosters or Bud.

The blossoming of more characterful beers elsewhere in the world has largely been inspired by organisations modelled on the Campaign for Real Ale, which organises the Great British Beer Festival.

The real eyebrow-raisers are the Americans: The mass-market U.S. labels are the world's lightest-tasting lagers, but some of the new generation of micro brewers make beers of more intense hop bitterness than can be found in Britain, Belgium. Or any other great beer nation.

The words "New Jersey" might evoke images of Frank Sinatra, the Mafia, prize fighters and Bruce Springsteen, but the state has suddenly started making great beers. The gutsy-sounding Heavyweight Brewing Company, of Ocean Township, New Jersey has a smoky-tasting brew of eight or nine per cent alcohol, called Perkuno's Hammer. "Perkuno" is the counterpart in Estonia to the Scandinavian thunder god Thor. This beer is described as a Baltic Porter, a categorisation that grew out of a series of articles I wrote in 1990, after a visit to Estonia.

Apart from its famous motor race, Indiana is not thought of as an exciting state, but its Three Floyds brewery (named after the family members who started it) makes beers of stunning hop character. Three Floyds' Imperial India Pale Ale is promised for the festival. This style of beer was originally made by British brewers for administrators and tea-planters in the Indian Empire. Today, the most distinctive examples are made in the U.S., where they seem mainly to be consumed by the denizens of Silicon Valley. ([HopDevil chosen Champion U.S. Cask-Conditioned Brew.](#))

Some journeys go full circle. The man who devised Starbucks, Gordon Bowker, joined me in a sampling session at the foreign stand at the Great British Beer Festival in 1980. We concentrated on Belgian beers. He went back to Seattle and established the RedHook brewery, in which Budweiser's parent has since acquired shares. Look out for the beautifully rounded Redhook India Pale Ale.

In recent years, Bières Sans Frontières has slowly been advancing from the back of the hall to a more prominent position. This year, it is in the middle, dividing the British bars. Bières Sans Frontières will have about 200 beers, in 20-30 styles, from at least ten countries. The British bars will have 300-400 beers.

Anyone who loves beer must surely welcome this extraordinary offering, which is completely at odds with the "Little Englander" soubriquet often thrown over the Campaign for Real Ale.

Bières Sans Frontières is an education. If British drinkers begin to understand that the world of beers extends far beyond Lager, Stout and Bitter, perhaps they will also finally grasp the special contribution made by the great ale of Great Britain.

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