

G'day, fancy an ale in Adelaide

Time was when the beer-lover heading for Australia and anxious to avoid its famously bland lagers could find solace only in Cooper's Sparkling Ale, the availability of which was restricted to Adelaide.

Or, at a pinch, the old ales of Tooth's and Toohey's in Sydney. Or, when all else failed, various stouts of which the best was again Cooper's, followed by Tooth's.

All of these products still exist (though the Tooth's name went with the takeover by Carlton), but there is now much more to enjoy. There would be even more but for bad timing.

The beer renaissance emerged in Australia just as the country was at the height of its swagger. There were paper millionaires everywhere, led by beer barons like John Elliott and Alan Bond.

Brewing became a desirable activity for the entrepreneur and several launched into it with excessive investments and unrealistic ambitions.

Now the country has fallen into deep recession and micros and brewpubs are having a hard time. Nonetheless, I did find about 20 new generation breweries when I visited Oz.

When I first wrote about Cooper's, in the mid to late 1970s, I silently wondered whether a smallish brewery making such characterful products could for much longer survive in Australia. On my recent visit, I was delighted to see that it had added to its range, and even gained a couple of competitors.

Let's have a refresher on Cooper's before we move on to some of the newer developments.

Thomas Cooper, who was born near Skipton, Yorkshire, founded the brewery in 1862. Because he was short of funds, he chose cheap land on the edge of Adelaide, and the brewery now sits among suburban villas.

Cooper married twice, and had 16 children and at one stage had to mortgage his house to keep the brewery in business.

Thomas Cooper was a Methodist. He sensibly saw no evil in beer, but believed pubs were dens of sin.

Cooper's had no pubs for many years, and today has only one, the Earl of Aberdeen, in the centre of Adelaide. I have often wondered how such a small brewery evaded takeover, and perhaps here is the answer: with no pubs, it was not particularly attractive to predators.

Ales and stouts conditioned in the cask or bottle were widely made in Australia before lager arrived in the 1920s. Cooper's never abandoned these products, though the company perhaps thought they would fade away when it finally introduced a range of lagers in 1969.

Instead, the "cloth cap" ales eventually found a new following and the lagers still represent only a third of the output.

A lower-gravity (1036-38) Original Pale Ale has been added in recent years, offering a "standard" alcohol content of 4.5 by volume. The Sparkling Ale has 1046 (5.8 ABV). Both of these beers are gold in colour, though the Sparkling Ale was amber red (and fuller in flavour) when I first knew it. A top-fermenting yeast is still used and until the mid 1980s it performed in tuns made from the Australian hardwood Jarrah. The tuns still stand, and the brewery still has some of the "puncheons" (actually hogs-heads) into which the wort was dropped to finish its primary stage. Today, cylindro-conicals are used. After primary fermentation, the wort is centrifuged, but a proportion of yeasty wort is held back. This is then added prior to racking or bottling, to start a secondary fermentation.

Cooper's claims that both draught and bottled beer is then warm-conditioned for six weeks at the brewery before being released, but I am not totally convinced of this.

Certainly, the beer is very yeasty. Veteran loyalists try to pour Cooper's bottled ales bright, but the new generation of drinkers prefer a cloudy presentation. The draught, served under pressure, always emerges cloudy. In a gesture to tradition, Cooper's has installed a working tun-and-puncheon in the Earl of Aberdeen. This was initially used to ferment a beer called Earl of Aberdeen Scotch Ale, though the Cooper's yeast produces a beer that is perhaps too attenuated to justify this designation. The beer is now being fermented at the brewery, and more widely marketed as Cooper's Dark.

There is a story behind the choice of Dark as a name. For years, the Cooper family was reluctant to commit its children's futures to the brewery.

One of the fifth generation, currently easing his way into the brewery, first took the precaution of qualifying in medicine as an alternative profession. Part of his training was in Cardiff, where he developed a taste for Brain's Dark.

All of Cooper's top-fermenting products are very fruity, with suggestions of apple, pear and banana esters, and a nice dash of hop in the finish. This is true not only of the ales but also the chocolatey Dark and the coffeeish, oily, earthy, Stout.

In some samplings, I found the Dark rather thin, but it was in fuller form at the Bull and Bear, the pub favoured by serious beer-lovers in Adelaide.

Such is the current success of Cooper's products that rival ale has been launched by the larger competitor South Australian Breweries, a company better known for its lagers.

This product, called Kent Town Real Ale, is mashed and boiled at the SAB brewery, then sent to a separate fermentation cellar at the company's Kent Town Maltings.

This beer (1048-50; 5.5 ABV) has a very soft fruitiness, reminiscent of gooseberries with sugar. It is served with a heavy sediment, and pasteurised in its draught form. A pasteurised ale can hardly be "real," but Australia is an upside-down world.

The yeasty "sparkling" ales of Adelaide probably now constitute a regional style. Three is, after all, a crowd.

The third entrant is Lion Real Ale, which has notably more hop character than either of its rivals. This is made by the Lion Brewery, which was founded in 1850, ceased production of beer in 1914, reopened in 1986, and has just escaped a second closure, by dint of new ownership.

Its beers now include a fruity Best Bitter and a well-balanced Porter, and a stout is planned. These products are the work of Graham Howard, an outstanding beermaker who seems to have had a hand in every micro or brew-pub in Australia. He even has a 75-litre home brewery in his house, and talks of expanding that.

At Lion, he has a British-made Morton brewtower of 20 hectolitres. This is installed in a restored tower brewery, the cellars of which form a pub. Unfortunately, the brewery and pub are not under the same ownership, though Lion beers are currently being served there. Adelaide is arguably the most beer-aware city in Australia. That will help Lion. By the same token, it is a highly competitive market, and that could make life very difficult. There is yet another brewery in the Adelaide area, at the city's port-town, which is less than 10 miles away.

The town is called Port Adelaide. To keep things simple, the brewery is in the Port Dock Hotel, which dates back to the earliest days.

Like many "hotels" in Australia - they were really inns - it today functions as a pub but has no bedrooms. Adelaide was once a thriving port, shipping lead, copper and zinc mined at Broken Hill.

The pub, a listed building, added an in-house brewery in 1986. The brewery buildings are traditional in design but modern in materials. The pine-clad vessels are visible to diners in a brasserie area linking the brewery and hotel.

Since adding the brewery, the Port Dock has had three or four changes in ownership, and for a time ceased production, but it is now back on line.

I enjoyed a malty, fruity, golden Lighthouse Ale (4.9 ABV); a creamy Black Diamond Bitter (4.9), closer in style to a Northern English Brown Ale; and a syrupy Old Preacher (6.0) that rung a North Yorkshire bell. Surprisingly, these were being made by a German brewer.

Why Old Preacher? "Because a preacher who was opposed to pubs had the places closed down at one point," I was told.

Horrified by this story, I inquired: "What happened?" "It turned into a bordello," came the reply. "It was the best bordello in the Southern Hemisphere." Thank heavens that sin always triumphs.

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