

Best Drunk When Fresh

You wouldn't buy stale bread, so don't accept beer tasting of damp paper, says Michael Jackso

One of life's great but simple pleasures, widely recognised, is the aroma, taste, and satisfaction offered by truly fresh bread. Another, less well acknowledged, is the same sequence of sensuous experiences brought forth by really fresh beer.

Like a loaf new from the oven, a beer fresh from the brewery exudes an aroma of faintly sweet, earthy graininess. We should expect this. Baking and malting are similar procedures. The Sumerians baked bread, before they knew how to make malt, then crumbled the loaves into water from the Tigris and Euphrates in order to brew beer. In Germany, the lenten diet of monks was supplemented by "liquid bread" -- heavy, malty brews like today's Paulaner Salvator.

I have never tasted lagers as freshly aromatic and delicious as they are in Munich and elsewhere in Bavaria -- or Prague and the rest of Bohemia. With a brewery in every village, the beer is as fresh as bread from a neighborhood bakery. This is especially true in Bavaria, a state with more than 800 breweries (England, Scotland and Wales together have about 200). Fresh beer is the greatest benefit offered by local breweries, and diversity of flavours the second.

There are still scores of beer-makers in Bavaria, and some in Belgium and Britain, who can say that their product is sold only "round the brewhouse chimney." I find this traditional phrase so evocative that I immediately want a glass of their beer.

If you have a local brewery, surrounded by its own pubs, pick the nearest to the source, and learn the pleasures of fresh beer. If you find similar characteristics in a beer that has travelled further, then you can be sure that it has been shipped as quickly as possible, and that the pub or shop is rotating its stock properly (first in, first out).

If, when the shelves are replenished, new stock is placed in front of old, those dusty bottles at the back will soon contain beer that smells and tastes of damp paper or cardboard. If bottles are displayed in the window, the beer will go cabbagey. You would not buy stale bread; do not accept beer in a similar condition.

In America, where beers are sent very long distances and endure considerable changes of climate, the biggest brewer, Budweiser, insists that its product be removed from the shelves after three months. In Britain, brewers who wish to sell in supermarkets are obliged to guarantee the beer's stability for nine months. Who is kidding whom? Certainly the consumer is being misled. Perhaps brewers can ensure that their beer is bright, and has not gone sour, after nine months -- but they cannot say that it will still have a freshness of aroma and flavour.

The consumers should always be told when the beer was bottled, and what it contains, apart from barley or wheat malt, water, hops, and yeast. They can then make up their own minds about its drinkability. "Best before" dates are nonsense. Most beers can only go downhill from the moment they leave the brewery. There are, though, important exceptions: the minority of beers that are designed to mature in the bottle. "Best before" dates do not do justice to them, either.

These brews are either not filtered or pasteurised, or are given a dosage of fresh yeast and sugar in the bottle, so that they can have a slow further fermentation. They are not totally bright -- they have a yeast sediment -- but their flavours are lively and complex. These are less like fresh bread than mature fruitcake.

An example at a conventional alcohol content, such as Worthington White Shield or the Oddbins bottle-conditioned range, may develop for 18 months. A stronger one will hit its stride at five years, and can mature for 20 if kept in a dark, cool place (but not refrigerated).

This applies to many Belgian specialties, especially those from Trappist monasteries, and to products from Britain such as Gale's Prize Old Ale, Thomas Hardy's Ale or Courage's Imperial Russian Stout. The Campaign for Real Ale and similar organizations in France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Scandinavia have been lobbying in Brussels for a European Community ruling in favour of bottling dates. They would like to get rid of unqualified "best before" dates, and have ingredient labeling.

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