

Beers for Burns

How about a Heather Ale on the poet's birthday?

On January 25 each year, Scotland celebrates the birth of its national poet, Robert Burns (1759-96). Burns wrote of love in a field of barley; lyrically described the turning of grains into malt, to be consumed as "the blood of John Barleycorn"; and devoted another poem to brewing.

A lesser writer who described Burns as the heather-headed bard offers a clue to what might be appropriate on his birthday. How about a Heather Ale? Every brewing nation used flowers, fruits, herbs and spices to flavour the barley brew before hops were widely introduced. In parts of Scotland where home-brewing is a culinary tradition, the use of heather never died.

Bruce and Scott Williams, who have a homebrew supply store in Glasgow, noticed a revival of interest in such traditions seven years ago, and launched their own heather ale as a commercial product. I tasted one of their early batches, and discussed it in some detail in *The Independent*.

Using the Gaelic name for heather, they call their ale Fraoch. This tawny, distinctly aromatic and flowery, beer additionally contains the catkins and leaves of sweet willow, also known as bog myrtle (*myrica gale*). With its bay-like flavours and aromas, it was a widespread predecessor to hops. Ginger is also used, as a substitute for the roots of a near-extinct variety of Scottish pine. The tips of more common varieties of pine and spruce have since been employed by the Williams brothers in a resiny, medicinal, fruity, amber-red, ale called Alba. This is another revival of a well-established tradition.

A perfumy golden beer reveals its flavouring in its name, Grozet, an old Scottish term for the gooseberry (meadowsweet is also used). The black brew Ebulum owes its colour to roasted oats and its botanical-sounding name and winey, woody, flavours to the elderberry.

Boy scout troops, students and forestry workers are engaged to pick the pine and spruce tips (in May) gooseberries and heather (July and August), and elderberry (September and October). Although these "botanicals" can be kept refrigerated, the brewery cannot go back for more once the season has ended. If the brews brothers make insufficient of one beer, they have a problem with their assorted four-pack. That beer has to be omitted and another included twice. Although consumers are warned about this, their complaints are testimony to the popularity of these unconventional views.

Such creations sounded a trifle romantic when they began, not least because the brothers did not even have their own brewery. They briefly used someone else's brewery, in the Highlands, but that closed. Then they switched to Maclay's, a brewery, in Alloa. Last year, that very old brewery gave up the ghost, but Heather Ale dodged the scythe.

The brothers now have a new brewery of their own (www.heatherale.co.uk), making the draught versions of their beer, in Strathaven (pronounced Strayven, and known for its cream toffee), just off the southbound motorway (M74/M6) , about 20 miles from Glasgow. They continue to brew the bottled versions in Alloa, but at the new, small, Forth Brewery. The brothers are shareholders in this second enterprise along with the former proprietors and brewer from Maclay's. Alloa was once an important beer-making town, and Forth's kettles are in the former bottling hall of George Younger's, another departed brewery.

While old local and regional breweries are having a hard time, yet-smaller new ones making speciality beers are thriving.

Just outside Strathaven, among fields of grazing cattle, a former grain mill, more than 200 years old, houses the brothers' own new brewery. The mill stands at the point where a spring flows into the fast-flowing waters of the Lanarkshire Avon. The spring water contributes to the brew. The mill lade is used to hatch salmon for the local angling club. A handsome little arched bridge, a spinner's cottage and the mill are in local whinstone and sandstone.

The building was in danger of collapsing into the river until the organisation Historic Scotland provided funds to underpin it. The culprit was the mighty mill wheel, which can still turn, but not without shaking the structure. The wheel will not be used again, but part of the milling equipment may be brought back to life to grind the grains for brewing. Its cogs and drive shafts still criss-cross the building.

A stainless steel vessel discarded by the dog-biscuit company Spillers has been handsomely clad in pine and installed to contain the infusion of barley-malt and water. Similarly scavenged vessels are used for brewing and fermentation.

As Bruce Williams tosses a handful of heather into the brew-kettle, he observes that the processes of beer-making are clearly visible to a visitor.

By summer, the brewery will be open to visitors. By then, it will have a gift shop, tasting room and snacks. Will there be tourists? "It is a pretty place, with riverside walks to an even older mill," notes brother Scott. "And visitors to Burns' Country might make a slight detour to buy our beer at source."

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