

Showing the tartan flag in Big Apple

A pub serving cask beer, and more to look for in Manhattan

Two brothers of Scottish extraction, one born in England and the other in Ireland, have opened a pub dedicated to cask-conditioned beer in New York City.

Stuart Hankin, 33, from Kings Wynforci, near Dudley, in the West Midlands, and his Dublin-born brother Nick, who is 23, went to New York in the 1980s, when their mother, Sheenah Mackenzie, married an American.

After Nick graduated, he returned to Britain, and worked as a cellarman under a renowned teacher. He toiled at the Glass Cutter's, in Dudicity, under the tutelage of Vic Norton, from the about-to-be lamented Holt, Plant and Deakin.

Nick also toured Belgium and Germany in pursuit of good beer. When the family decided to open a bed-and-breakfast a year or two ago, Stuart, who was working in construction, did the conversion.

"After that, I wanted to work on another family project, so we decided to open a pub", he told me.

The location they found was an 1870s building that began life as a Yiddish theatre and was later a German beer hall. In recent years, the main part of the building had served as the bar area for jazz club Fat Tuesdays, which was in the cellar.

In this role, it had suffered benign neglect, retaining its beer-hall murals, stained-glass screens, lavish oak panelling, historical photographs, elk and deer heads, and moulded plasterwork.

The building, at 190 Third Avenue, between 17th and 18th Streets, is in Manhattan's Gramercy area, a popular neighbourhood for off-Broadway theatres.

Inspired by their ancestry, the brothers named their pub the Highlander. It offers British-accented food, and custom-brewed ales in English and Scottish styles. The beers are served without blanket pressure, from firkins and kilderkins.

When I was there last month, a Dark Mild, at an original gravity of 1038 (3.4 per cent ABV) was tapped, to much excitement.

Called Highlander 60/-, it had a claret colour, poured with a good head, was smooth and light, with a refreshing palate and a mildly dry finish.

I considered it a perfect example of the style, though some Americans, unaccustomed to Milds, thought it just too light in body.

Perhaps they would have preferred Highlander Special Bitter, cheekily dubbed HSB (1048, 4.5 per cent). This had a good copper colour; a smooth, clean, malty, sweetness; and a faint orangey hoppiness.

A beer described as both a Brown Ale and an 80/- (1058, 5.4 per cent) was clearly in the Scottish style. It had a very attractive dark-cherry colour and good lacework; a soft, lightly chewy body; and a hint of liquorice in its malt character.

It was clearly my favourite, and was subsequently honoured in a ground-breaking festival of British and American cask ales in Chicago.

Sledgehammer Stout (1050, 4.7 per cent) was solid black, light hut smooth, with a gently roasty, dryish finish.

All of the beers are made entirely from British malt and hops, and fermented with Ringwood yeast named after the brewery established in the New Forest by British micro pioneer Peter Austin.

The yeast earlier saw service in now-defunct breweries in Hull and Halifax, though not Hell.

Highlander employs an American brewer with an Italian-Welsh name, Luca Evans. He formerly manned a kettle designed by Peter Austin at the Shipyard brewery in the New England town of Portland, Maine.

Now he makes the Highlander products at the Middle Ages brewery in the town of Syracuse, 270 miles northwest of New York and not far from Lake Ontario. Middle Ages was established last year by Marc and Mary Rubenstein after they sold their family scrap-metal business. "We were home-brewers, and thought we made pretty good beer," Marc told me. "We wanted to try it professionally."

As home-brewers and Monty Python fans, they had made a Holy Grail Ale. That name led them into "Middle Ages" as a rubric for their brewery. "Also, we are middle-aged," joked Mary. She is 39 and Marc 41.

They, too, have a Peter Austin brewhouse, though with a special refinement: the characteristic brickwork round the kettle has a battlemented pattern to reinforce the Middle Ages theme.

The brewery is in a 1940s building that formerly housed an ice-cream factory. The beers include the fruity Grail Ale (1050, 4.9 per cent); the firmer, very boppy, Beast (1053, 5.3 per cent); and the darker, maltier, intense, Wizard (1060, 6.4 per cent).

These can sometimes be found cask conditioned at an outstanding local beer bar called the Blue Tusk (165 Walton Street).

Opposite the Blue Tusk is the Empire brewpub (120 Walton Street), where I particularly enjoyed the German-style Hefe-Weizen.

There is a second good beer-bar in town, Clark's (122 W. Jefferson) and a more erratic brewpub, Syracuse Suds (210-216 W. Water Street).

Not everyone has reason to visit Syracuse, but should you find yourself there, you need not thirst for good ale.

And don't miss...

Also new in New York City... a hand pumped, unfiltered, tank-conditioned and very full-flavoured Extra Special Bitter is the star at the new Commonwealth brewpub, in the Rockefeller Center, at the heart of Midtown Manhattan. (Rockefeller Plaza and West 48th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues). This brewpub has the same owner as Commonwealth and Back Bay, in Boston.

"ESB" has become a style in the US. A more toffeeish, fruity example is offered in similar form at the SoHo Brewing Company, latest incarnation of what used to be called the Manhattan brew-pub (upstairs, 40-42 Thompson Street, at Broome and West Broadway, in SoHo).

I have also been offered this in speciality beer bars among which The Blind Tiger (at 10th and Hudson, in the West Village) is a new, cosy bar serving about 30 draughts, mainly American micros.

A friendly rival for the equally cosy DBA ("Doing Business As..."), at 41 First Avenue, between Second and Third Streets, in the East Village. These are good places to taste the beers of local micros Brooklyn and Neptune.

I enjoyed an iron-ish, hoppy Pale Ale at Typhoon, an odd combination of brewpub and fashionably ambitious Thai restaurant. (Well, perhaps not so odd: my Fuller's and Young's London locals offer Thai food, albeit far less elaborate). Typhoon is in Midtown, at 22 East 54th Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues.

There was a whiskyish Barley Wine at the Chelsea Brewing Company, in a yacht marina development. The development, called Chelsea Piers, is at the Hudson River end of West 23rd Street. The brewpub entrance is Pier 59.

A.J. Gordon's is an Upper West Side neighbourhood bar now making its own beers. The brews are not ambitious, but I enjoyed a hoppy IPA, at a hearty 6 per cent. This brew-pub is on West 79th, between Broadway and Amsterdam.

Hansen's brewpub, on a prime site at Times Square, turns out to have been planned by people who know more about property and restaurants than beer.

The interior design does not make for an easily workable brewery, and this did not please the German brewer, who left in short order. It is to be hoped that things can only get better.

New York City brew pubs previously discussed in What's Brewing: Zip City, West Side, Yorkville, Carnegie Hill and (in Brooklyn) Park Slope.

Published Online: APR 12, 2000

Published in Print: NOV 1, 1996

In: What's Brewing