

Zero is a hero

American brew wins in London

A brew designed by an American has been judged Champion Beer of London. The brew was created by Grant Johnston, who first came to attention at Marin Brewing, Larkspur Landing, near San Francisco. Johnston has over the years won 16 medals, half of them gold, at the Great American Beer Festival.

The British award is for the Pale Ale he designed for ZeroDegrees, a brewpub, bar and restaurant (mussels to mash; wood-fired pizza oven), in Blackheath, a prosperous, villagey, suburb in south-east London. The establishment has existed for little more than a year.

The ZeroDegrees Pale was chosen as overall champion from the winners of three categories. It had already won the ale category. ZeroDegrees additionally won the lager category, with its Pilsner, also designed by Johnston. A catch-all category for bottled products was won by Young's world-classic Special London Ale, from a brewery with almost 500 years of history.

Johnston, a great admirer of British brewers and their products comments: "I consider myself very lucky, as an American craft brewer, to have had the opportunity to work in London. I was very happy to hear that ZeroDegrees did so well. The recipes may be mine, but the credit for this success should go to the present brewer, Mike McGuigan. He was the one who brewed the winning beers. I hope he will continue to do well there."

Deferring in the opposite direction, McGuigan said "these are Grant's beers. He created them. I could not believe it when I was called up to receive the awards. I still feel shell-shocked."

McGuigan has been a brewer for five years. He has worked in British micros and for the highly-regarded regional brewery Brakspear's, in Henley, near London.

ZeroDegrees Pale Ale (4.6 per cent alcohol by volume) is brewed from Maris Otter barley, malted at Fawcett's, of Yorkshire. In addition to Pale Ale malt, some crystal is used, and less than ten per cent wheat. The bittering hops are Target, grown in England. A greater influence is the finishing hop: "Loads of" Cascades and "a touch of" Centennial.

As a judge, I loved the flowery-fruity (peaches?) aroma; big, assertive, orangey, palate; and appetisingly long bitterness of finish. The Pilsner scored for delicate but lively Saaz hop flavors; a firmly creamy malt background and a crisp finish.

The tasting was blindfold, and the other panellists were Mark Dorber, from the renowned White Horse pub, in Parson's Green, London; former Whitbread brewer Peter Ogie, an experienced judge and consultant; Dylan Jones, editor of the British edition of GQ; and two contributors to London's only metro daily, the Evening Standard (Andrew Jefford, who writes on drink; and "Ed" Sullivan, who reports the bar scene).

The judging took place at Mash, the first "American-style" brewpub in London. The competition was the idea of Mash's brewer, Paul Conlin. The idea was to draw attention to the recent resurgence of brewing in the city. There are currently 14 breweries, owned by 13 companies, in London. This is the most the city has boasted since the loss of two local London breweries in the mid 1960s. London was a brewing capital in the 1700s.

Notable absentees from the competition were Fuller's (slogan: "Whatever You Do, Take Pride"). Likewise Guinness and Anheuser-Busch (both of which have breweries in London).

Britain as a whole has about 400 breweries.

* Zero Degrees Micro-Brewery Bar and Restaurant, 29-31 Montpelier Vale, Blackheath, London SE3OTJ. Tel 44-020-8852-5619.

Published: JULY 13, 2001
In: Beer Hunter Online