

Apples and black treacle in a real winter warmer

Michael Jackson selects, as his beer of the month, Gale's Prize Old Ale: strong and spicy, hinting of calvados and full of earthy perfumes

Why would a suggestion of calvados lurk in a beer, especially one so obviously English as to be called Gale's Prize Old Ale? Could it be because the apple orchards and calvados distilleries of Normandy are not far across the water from Hampshire, where Prize Old Ale is made? No, it is not that the scent of Norman apples has invaded this wonderfully distinctive beer, though I would happily uncork a bottle after dinner - especially if cheese were being served. Is there any beer that better accompanies a roquefort or stilton? There are several contenders, but none with quite the dry, sappy, apples-and-black-treacle fruitiness of Gale's Prize Old Ale.

With the clocks back and winter looming, now is the time to consider beers that are not only sustaining but also strong, to warm the chest and soothe the over-indulged stomach.

About 75 of the brews listed in the 1992 edition of *The good Beer Guide* (CAMRA, £7.99) might broadly be considered as winter warmers, and more than 40 imply that they are old ales. These range from Prize Old Ale in the South, to Wadworth's brandyish Old Timer in the West; Marston's fruity-creamy Owd Roger in the Midlands; Robinson's warming Old Tom in the North-west; Theakston's famously rich Old Peculiar (go home from Bonfire Night to this one, with a slice of Yorkshire parkin), and Broughton's malty Old Jock in Scotland.

"Old ale" implies a long maturation of several months, though that technique is no longer widespread. Where it is used, the beer will gain strength during a slow secondary fermentation. Most old ales are dark, though they tend toward a treacle-toffee dryness rather than the roasty, "burnt" character of a porter or stout, or the more syrupy, liqueur-ish fullness of a barley wine.

Gale's Prize Old Ale is the real thing and I have chosen it as my beer of the month.

It begins with the sweet and increasingly rare Maris Otter variety of barley, grown and malted in East Anglia. All the barley is germinated on stone floors, rather than in the more modern systems of boxes or drums. This system of floor malting is felt by some brewers and whisky distillers to produce a cleaner tasting, drier end-product. As the germinating barley is kilned into a malt, a proportion is toasted to near-blackness to impart that treacle-toffee taste and colour.

At the brewery in the village of Horndean, near Portsmouth, the malts of East Anglia meet the hard water of Hampshire. Because Prize Old Ale is a specialty, only 30 barrels are made in a

single batch. A small, 65-year-old copper kettle that would otherwise be retired is kept exclusively for this brew, which would be lost in the newer, 200-barrel, stainless steel vessel.

In this kettle, the sweetness of the malt is balanced with the soft dryness of the Fuggles variety of hops from Hereford and Worcester and the earthy perfumes of Goldings from east Kent. The brew is then finished with exotic Styrian hops for extra bouquet.

Fermentation takes place in copper, too (in most breweries, stainless steel is usual, though coated wood and even stone can be found). Gale's has its own strain of yeast, and this is where the distinctive house character begins to emerge most strongly.

All ale yeasts (as opposed to the lager family of strains) produce fruity flavours, and these are accentuated in strong beers. Gale's yeast eventually takes Prize Old Ale to about 9 per cent alcohol by volume, and the brew develops that calvados-apple character.

How old is the beer? It has an authentically long maturation of six to 12 months in glass-lined, cast-iron tanks, but that is not the end of the matter. Gale's Prize Old Ale is available almost exclusively in the bottle, and it is one of the very few beers that continue to mature in this form. (Do not try this with a conventional beer - it can only go quickly downhill.)

Better still, Gale's uses the most traditional, basic method of achieving this. It neither filters nor pasteurises the beer, thereby leaving its residual yeast and malt-sugar to continue working in the bottle. The beer is bottled and corked by hand.

The handful of other brewers who make beers for bottle-ageing usually play safe by centrifuging or filtering the product, then add new yeast and sugar.

The Prize Old Ale now in the pubs and shops was probably brewed last year. It will be very drinkable, but will gain roundness and complexity if it is laid down in a dark cellar. Do not refrigerate - this will arrest its development and flatten its character.

I recently tasted a Prize Old Ale that had spent two or three years in the bottle, and found a combination of sharp acidity and warming spiciness (Victory V lozenges?)

In my experience, beers made to be laid down tend to come into their own after about five years. A sample brewed in 1984 and bottled a year later was less sharp, with much more of the calvados character, especially in the bouquet. That has been set aside as a "vintage" brew, and will not be released until the year 2000, by which time it will be 16 years old.

Whether it will continue to gain complexity and roundness for that long - ore even have reached its peak - is open to question. A past head brewer at Gale's swore the beer needed 20 years to hit its stride. I have had both disappointing and delightful experiences with strong ales of that range of age. I hope to offer a further interim report on the vintage edition of Prize Old Ale at the turn of the century.

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