

# The perfect pint for a chilly night

## Michael Jackson explores the cellars of Suffolk in search of the secrets that make winter ales a seasonal special

While more predictable drinkers were swishing their beaujolais nouveau, I was assessing the new season's winter ale. Almost all brewing nations have beers made either mainly or exclusively for this time of year and Britain has at least 75, from Young's Winter Warmer (London) to Plympton Cockle-Roaster (Devon) to the less cosy-sounding Skull-Splitter (Orkney). Most have been released in the last week or so, and many are available only on draught in their own corners of the country. This year I decided to begin the season with one from the heart of the beer-growing region.

The new season's barley of East Anglia has now been turned into malt and is ready to be spiced with the hop crop of Kent, Hereford and Worcester. To taste the result I headed for East Anglia, to Bury St. Edmunds, where the railway station stands next to a malting and there are two more in the town, one as part of the Greene King brewery.

It is the richness of the malt, rather than the floweriness of the hop, that characterises winter ales. These things are meant to be sustaining rather than refreshing.

Greene King's entrant, called simply Winter Ale, is beautifully malty with an almost chocolate richness. It is smooth but not cloying and, like most winter brews, it has a warming belt of alcohol (just under 6 per cent by volume).

It is unusual that it is made by blending. One ingredient is St. Edmund (6.3 percent), the paler, drier strong ale that Graham Greene ceremonially brewed when, on his eightieth birthday, he visited the family firm. This literary brew is available "straight" as a bottled beer.

The other two ingredients are beers that the brewery effectively keeps a secret: it simply does not sell them as beers in their own right, though both are delicious. To find these beers in their unblended form, it is necessary to visit the brewer and be led through cellars and tunnels that were probably first excavated as monks' hiding places during the Reformation (the brewery is next door to the home of the last abbot).

In the interests of a greater understanding and appreciation of Winter Ale, I went exploring. One of the "secret" beers, known within the brewery as BPA (Best Pale Ale), would be interesting enough in its own right. It is a strongish (about 5 percent), mild-tasting malty ale, and not really pale at all. The other "secret beer", an extra-strong (12 percent) brew known simply as 5x, is a classic.

Apart from its appearance disguised within the Winter Ale, the 5x has another role for which it is groomed long and hard.

Most British styles of ale mature for perhaps a week -- or, at the most, two -- in the brewery's cellar. Any beer with Old in its name should spend a little longer. Old ale is a style, originally brewed at the end of the winter and laid down like a provision. Old and winter ales are overlapping traditions. Before refrigeration, wild yeasts made brewing impossible in summer. The last of the "provision" or "stock" ales would then be drained when winter returned or blended into the new season's beers.

The 5x stays in maturation for more than a year and usually for longer. The current batch has been five years in maturation. Between one and three years of this period is spent in wood. I know of no other beer made this way in Britain. The use of wood for maturation has long been abandoned by most of the world's brewers, and the eccentric 5x lives in its own mansard-roofed cellar and attic, well away from the rest of Greene King's beers.

The beer is matured in two ceiling-high wooden tuns of Victorian vintage. They are kept in shape by a master cooper who still works for Greene King (the brewery has long ceased to use wooden casks, and the cooper spends most of his time in the company's wine and spirit department).

The tuns are topped with what looks like sand and gravel but is, so I was told, Suffolk marl (soil consisting of clay and lime). Occasionally a brewery worker climbs a wooden staircase and a ladder to reach the top of the tuns and rake the marl. This mysterious material is meant to filter out any wild yeasts or other microflora in the air.

The head brewer, Alistair Heeley, is openly superstitious about the wild organisms that can lead astray a fermented product. Like an actor refusing to say "Macbeth", Mr. Heeley declines, within the walls of the brewery, to utter the name of one especially haunting example.

Despite this, he recognises that all beer was once made in this apparently perilous way and prefers to enjoy living dangerously with what he terms "the flora and fauna" in the 5x tuns.

The beer undoubtedly develops idiosyncrasies while it is in the wood. In its aroma it perhaps has hints of the "horse blanket" or straw-like character found in some old ales, and a dash of apple. In its palate is a depth of fruitiness, a cake-like quality and hints of iron worthy of a Cheval Blanc.

If your palate enjoys a challenge, look out for 5x in its second role. It is blended with the BPA to make a highly distinctive, year-round bottled ale called Strong Suffolk (6 per cent) that can be found outside East Anglia in specialist beer shops at a little under £1 a bottle, which is not bad for the beer world's answer to a Cheval Blanc. (It even has a horse on the label -- a Suffolk Punch.)

Strong Suffolk is a brew of such complexity as to be extraordinarily versatile. At dinners of the Brewers' Guild it has been served with East Anglian pickled herrings (a similar beer made in Belgium is typically served with shrimps); I like it with Stilton cheese, and AJ Cole, a bakery in Saffron Walden, puts it in Christmas puddings.

There's a dilemma; if I have my Christmas pudding with Strong Suffolk, that means deposing the usual Old Peculiar from the plum duff.

I suppose I could always leave a bottle of Yorkshire's famous Old Ale as a winter warmer for Santa when he calls.

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