

Festival of Britain

Lagers are in the dark at the celebration of cask-conditioned ales

It was a scary moment Ray McConnell opened his door to me and revealed a dentist's surgery. I had been expecting a brewery. It turned out that McConnell's principal occupation is as a dentist; on his days off he indulges his passion for brewing, in an old industrial building down the road. He is one of a growing number of professional people who brew beer commercially but as a sideline.

McConnell - who brews in West Warwick, Rhode Island - confusingly calls his beers Emerald Isle, in honour of his ethnicity, and will offer a very hoppy, English-style, India Pale Ale at the Great British Beer Festival, starting next Tuesday at Olympia, London.

North American brewers will contribute the best part of 100 beers, many of them British in style, from Alimony Ale (allegedly the most bitter beer in the country) to Woodstock Big Indian Porter. They will all be at a special corner dubbed The Humphrey Bogart Bar.

In a festival that is dedicated to the celebration of British-style cask-conditional ales, a growing amount of space is being given to very similar products (from bitter to wheat beer) made elsewhere in the world. Some of these are new, showing how many foreign brewers are being influenced by British ales. Some are older specialities that survived the spread of lager brewing in the second half of the last century and the first half of this. "Foreign beer that is not lagers" makes a clumsy rubric; no wonder the festival organisers have dodged that issue and settled for cinematic themes. The French and Low Countries selection will be found at The Hercule Poirot Bar.

The Frog and Rosbif, in Paris, is a brewpub run by an Englishman and an Iclander. They will be showing their beer in London for the first time. Their Parislytic ale sounds loutish, but turns out to be sweetish, chocolaty and soft-bodied.

Any drinker who loves British bottle-conditioned specialities, like White Shield Worthington, should try a beautiful ale called Orval, from the Belgian monastery of the same name, in the Ardennes. White Shield may be a British classic, but it is out-punched in all departments by this very dry interpretation of a Trappist ale.

People who have experienced the quenching properties of the orange-tasting, widely available, Belgian wheat beer Hoegaarden might enjoy a couple of local rivals in that style: the Tarwebier of Bruges, or the Witbier of Watou (near Ypres).

British ale-lovers are frequent visitors to the Dusseldorf brewpub Zum Uerige, where they find solace in its copper-coloured, big-tasting Altbier. This will be available along with such German specialities as the Schneider range of clovey-tasting wheat beers and Rauchenfels Steinbier, the latter caramelised with hot rocks.

Beers from Germany and Central Europe will be at the Peter Lorre Bar (there is clearly a serious film-buff at work here).

There will also be treats for the drinker who, even at a festival of ales, simply must have a lager. One of the best German lagers slated to appear is the dark brown, intensely smoky, Aecht Schlenkerla Rauchbier; made from malt dried over a beechwood fire. Another great, strong, rich, dark lager from Germany is the Doppelbock of the Benedictine abbey of Andechs, near Munich.

The earliest lagers were all dark. Lager is the German word for "store", and refers to long periods of maturation, making for smooth flavours. It has nothing to do with colour nor has colour anything to do with body or alcohol content. A dark brew is not necessarily stronger or more fattening than a pale one.

If, despite all of that, you are still afraid of anything other than a golden lager, try the slightly hazy, and wonderfully hoppy, St Christoffel Blond, from the Netherlands. Or the superbly malty, but beautifully balanced, Augustiner Edelstoff, the favourite lager among the people of Munich.

If these have too much aroma and flavour for you, then you had better go home and open a half-frozen can of something brewed for blandness by Ruritarians in Rochdale. Or an over priced maize-made from an exotic country that is too hot to for either malting barley or hops and has no brewing tradition. Enjoy!

Published Online: MAR 22, 2000

Published in Print: AUG 3, 1996

In: The Independent