

How to save a beer style

There is no set procedure, but it starts with writing about it

My parents were not anti drink, but didn't really do it, so I had no early training. I was at high school before I started going to pubs and ordering beer.

This was a long time ago. In those innocent days, kids did not start smoking until they were about 14, and then only tobacco, though they did inhale. I did not fancy smoking. I wanted to be a great writer, like Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald or Faulkner. The key to literary genius seemed to be drink. I did not realise then that the two activities could be completely combined.

At my high school, in Britain, my more immediate concern was to avoid playing soccer, an extremely boring sport. I asked the teacher if I could do some roadwork instead, and he agreed. My buddies O'Brien and Slavinsky and I donned tracksuits and headed down a country road, up a steep hill to a pub so isolated that it was grateful for any business. As we had guessed, they would even serve under-age kids in tracksuits.

"Mild or Bitter?" demanded the old lady behind the bar. "Which is cheaper?" I asked. "Mild," she responded, in a manner that told me it was a dumb question. I could just about afford a half pint. That was my first lesson in beer: I had learned that there was more than one style.

Within a couple of years, I was working as a reporter on a small-town weekly. I was responsible for a neighbourhood, and every week had to visit every church, synagogue and mosque, every labor union club and every pub in search of local gossip. In every club and pub, I had a beer while I tried to cultivate the bartender as a source.

I learned that people in Irish neighborhoods were loyal Guinness, and added it to my collection of styles (much later, I decided to call it a Dry Stout). Working-class old ladies drank "Milk Stout," which was held to be nutritious. Upwardly-mobile young women preferred something called Lager, which they thought less masculine than other beers. In the evenings, I covered political meetings, strike ballots and concerts. I discovered that musicians liked Barley Wine: a large amount of alcohol in a small volume of liquid, obviating the necessity leave the stand in mid-solo for a leak.

By the time I got to Fleet Street, on a tide of Bitter, drinkers were specifying "Cooking" or "Keg." This was a jokey allusion to "cooking" sherry: cheap wine that was not really good enough to drink. I realised that I preferred "cooking" beer (the unfiltered, unpasteurised version) to the supposedly-fancier "keg" (processed for brightness and consistency).

Many drinkers preferred "cooking" beer, which came to be known as "real ale," the subject of a now-famous consumerist campaign. That beery Battle of Britain inspired me, but by then I had travelled in many other countries as a journalist, and realised that there were other beers worthy of a wider appreciation, especially in Belgium and Germany. Journalists like crusading; they think they can save the world, though more modest aims may be better realised.

While others started to write about Chester's Fighting Mild or Theakston's Old Peculier, I found myself trying to explain Lambic, Witbier and Oudenaarde Brown; K lsch, Altbier and Berliner Weisse.

It was very difficult, on several counts.

Some brewers were unwilling to discuss, or unable to explain, their beers. One major brewery, Stella Artois, pretty much threw me out, though we are the best of friends today. Even now, some breweries, mainly in Germany, seem to regard me as a nuisance. Augustiner, of Munich, have said they don't want to be in my books because that just causes them to be bothered by phone calls from Americans.

In those early days, despite my already having considerable experience on the pitching and writing of stories, I found it hard to arouse even a glimmer of interest among editors. "We ran a piece about beer a couple of years ago," they would say. "You carried a story on wine last week - and you will do the same next week," I would reply. If I did persuade them, they would - naturally enough - want me to write about beers their readers could find

This was another problem. When I did get something into print, I often wanted to explain to my English-speaking audience, in Britain and America, the aromas, flavors and merits of beers they could not buy in their own countries.

I comforted myself with the thought that it must have been equally frustrating for the musicologists who went to the Mississippi Delta in the 1950s to record blues artists with a view to saving and popularising their music. On reflection, it was easier for them. If they could get a tape on to radio, the listeners could decide whether they liked Blind

Preacher Johnson's 12-string guitar. If I wrote an article about a sour Flemish Red Ale, my readers still could not taste it.

When I was a kid, music seemed to be separated into classical, light, popular and something not very respectable called jazz. There was no sense that even the blues could be divided into strands from different regions or periods each with their own validity and appeal.

The few books that could be found on beer talked rather vaguely, often as an afterthought, about different types, such as Pilsner, Bock, Ale or Porter, but there was little sense that these were a part of a far wider spectrum. Nor, again, that each style had its own geography and history, mood and moment.

I suppose those musicologists often fretted as to whether a particular group of artists really did constitute a style. There must have been moments of self-doubt when they wondered whether they as commentators were imposing a logic where it did not really exist. Were Southern and Northern English Brown Ales really different styles? Was Saison a style? What about those sour Flemish Red Ales? Yet such beers required explaining.

Several breweries made them, so they did constitute something with its own constituency. If anyone other than the locals were to drink them, it would be necessary to explain that, yes, they were meant to be sour-ish. Also that they were astonishingly refreshing. Otherwise, strangers encountering these beers would simply conclude that they were "off". An American book dismissed a Berliner Weisse as tasting like celery tonic. Perhaps the writer was shocked by a beer that did not in any way resemble Bud.

I was very reassured when other writers picked up my definitions, though my thoughts were often recycled as their own. I was even more reassured when my descriptions of beers' aromas and flavors were pirated, or exceeded. When I started writing about beer, it was hard to find anything but the most general descriptions of flavour and aroma. Even in the world of wine, writers are ribbed for being pretentious, and far greater mockery awaits anyone so bold or foolish as to find sea air, fresh leather or linseed in his pint of Bitter. Yet how else to explain the myriad of aromas and flavors that combine there?

Do consumers want to know? If someone is looking for a light refresher, he needs someone to tell him that Duvel is not quite like that. So how does Duvel taste? That is not easy to explain, but need not be a secret. If a consumer is confronted by three black

brews, she may well need to know the difference between Mackeson, Guinness and Alaskan Smoked Porter.

In my 1977 World Guide to Beer, I described American ales as "an endangered species." Sounds incredible today, but it was absolutely true then. In Britain, Mild is today at risk. In Belgium, I still worry about those Red Ales. "Don't write about Rodenbach," someone told me in 1976. "I have inside knowledge that the brewery will be out of business before your book appears." Nobody in those days was producing a Märzenbier or really good Bock in the U.S.; today they blossom in North America but are fading in Germany.

Oatmeal Stout was extinct when I wrote about it, and my doing so encouraged Charles Finkel and Samuel Smith's to bring it back from the dead. I briefly mentioned Adambier, and someone sought to resuscitate that. Styles like Irish Red Ale, Porter, Imperial Stout and Vienna lager existed only vestigially.

"Explain how to save a beer style," someone demanded of me. There is no set procedure. You just write and hope for the best.

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