

Trying to find a pearl of truth in oyster stout

There are few styles of beer that I have never tasted. The only one that springs quickly to mind is oyster stout.

Despite my never having sampled the stuff, I shall be taking every opportunity to raise the question of oyster stout during the next few weeks.

Not a single floppy disk will enter my word processor without having a little oyster stout spilled on it. I shall introduce the beverage subtly and casually into conversations:

"Nice morning, eh?"

"Yes, just the sort of day for an oyster stout."

"See Fulham lost at Huddersfield?"

"Yes, they obviously needed priming with oyster stout."

You know the sort of thing.

The reason for my sudden and overwhelming concern on this topic is that a friend of mine, a small brewer in a distant land, has taken it into his head to add an o.s. to his range. His company is about to move into a new brewhouse, and he wants to make a celebration brew.

Their brewery is in a corner of the world famous for its oysters. He thought he might add two and six and see whether they made ten (double stout and half a dozen oysters). But how does he make oyster stout?

There is, I should concede, a view that oyster stout never existed as a special style. That it was, so to speak, a chimera.

In Heaven

This line of argument, which I have heard expressed at Guinness, maintains that the idea sprung from the consumption of stout with oysters. Presumably, particular stouts were thought to go especially well with oysters. They were therefore known as oyster stouts.

I question this. I believe that stout (or, more likely porter) was originally consumed with oysters simply because both were everyday items in the London of Dickens and Thackeray. Porter was the local style of beer, and oysters were plentiful and inexpensive in the days before pollution won the battle for our estuaries and coasts.

Despite the intensity of stout and porter, and the delicacy of oysters, their marriage turned out to have been made in heaven.

The notion of stout simply as an accompaniment to oysters seems to have been behind Oyster Feast Stout, made by the Colchester Brewing Company from around 1900 to celebrate the annual oyster harvest on the river Colne. It may well have been a conventional stout, taking its name simply from the occasion.

Sensual

The Colchester company was taken over by Ind Coope and Allsopp in 1925, and the Romford Brewery continued to make a stout under this name until at least 1940, according to Michael Ripley of the Brewers' Society.

In the United States, where I advise several restaurants on their choice and presentation of beers, I always include a stout or porter on the menu, with the suggestion that diners try it with oysters.

I have yet to suggest the prescription offered by the Front Street brew-pub in Santa Cruz, California. This worthy establishment provides its guests with a glass of porter that additionally contains a whole oyster. This is called an "oyster shooter", and is a sensual drink, albeit awkward to consume.

As to the use of oysters as an ingredient, Mike Ripley has traced several very old recipes in which the shells were used as finings. Being very alkaline, they are a useful antacid, and therefore counteracted sourness in beer.

In a pre-war edition of the Journal of the Institute of Brewing, Mike found a reference to the manufacture of an oyster concentrate. This was made on Stewart Island, New Zealand, from introduced English oysters (70 dozen per gallon of concentrate). The product was approved by H. M. Customs and Excise as an adjunct in brewing. It was said to improve head retention "without a trace of fishiness".

With his nose to the trail nonetheless, Mike then tracked down Mr Harold Read, a retired brewer who once worked for Hammerton of Stockwell, London, and who remembers trials with an oyster stout in 1938. "We obtained a canned concentrate from New Zealand," Mr Read recalls, "and added different amounts to our own sweet Oatmeal Stout." Apparently the additions were made at priming stage, and in the range of half to two per cent.

The motivation for the experiment may have had less to do with gastronomic notions than with the fashion ability at the time of "nourishing" stouts. I have a vague recollection of ads saying "Hammerton for Zest!" a couple of decades later.

On the oyster stout, Mr Read recalls: "The resultant product found favour with my colleagues and the directors, and a marketing tryout was planned. However, the second or third trial consignment of the concentrate contained a faulty can, which had gone bad. The smell of this was so appalling that we cancelled everything, and dropped the idea.

"Later that year, another brewer took the good cans of concentrate from us and actually marketed an oyster stout. However, I believe production stopped when the war came." The second brewery was J. J. Young of Portsmouth.

One of the first companies my faraway friend approached, at my suggestion, was Isle of Man Breweries, successors to Castletown, whose oyster stout labels have popped up in several well-known books.

He received a very prompt and friendly reply from the chairman and managing director, John Cowley, regretting that the company had no record of precisely how Castletown's oyster stout had been made. Mr Cowley added: "I understand that it was pre the last war when this was carried out. I regret that I am also not able to help you with any former brewers who had a particular knowledge of this. I am sorry to be so unhelpful."

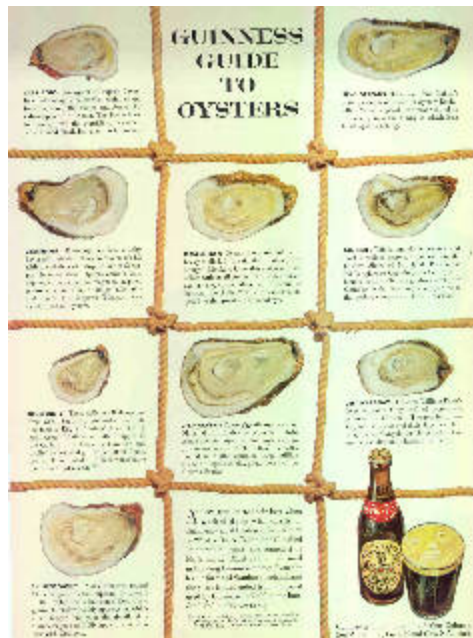
The labels I have seen look more recent than that, and it was my impression that this product continued until well into the 1960s.

Thus far, these inquiries have at least turned up our one witness who made trial brews. Furthermore, the style seems at least to be sufficiently recent to offer the hope of more first-hand information. If you have any knowledge of oyster stout, I would appreciate hearing from you.

Recapture

It is an opportunity to assist in the revival of a rare and colorful style of beer. Our stout oyster may turn out not to have been dead, but merely asleep.

Meanwhile, Keith Thomas and friends are seeking to recapture the true London porter, which in its original form seems to have gone missing during the First World War. Their samples are being preferred for comment to some very elderly drinkers. There is not much time left in which to net this coelacanth. What's Brewing will be bringing you more news of this. I am sure you understand the point and urgency of such exercises. A zoologist would.



Guinness advertising (circa 1950)

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