

From toffee apples to a bass-baritone

What does it take to make good beer great? Michael Jackson on that Extra something.

In much advertising for drinks, "smooth" and "no aftertaste" are code for "no flavour whatever." Their promise is that you will not know whether you have had a drink or ingested "wet air," the Native American writer William Least Heat Moon's term for his country's blandest beers.

A young writer on drink told me the other day that she preferred her Guinness cold, "because, that way, I cannot taste the malt and hops." Why drink beer if you do not like the taste of malt and hops?

Good brewers go to a great deal of trouble choosing their strain of barley, specifying how it should be kilned in the maltings, selecting hop varieties, finding water of the softness or hardness they prefer, and breeding yeasts that confer subtle and complex background flavours. They add their ingredients and manipulate the timing and temperature of their processes as though they were chemists.

A fine Pilsner lager has the flowery fragrance and dryness of Bohemian hops; a Munich example is softer, maltier and sweeter; a Dörmunder between the two. The grain in a wheat beer helps impart a refreshingly tart quality. In ales, the yeasts add a dash of fruitiness; likewise in porters and stouts with their roast-malt, espresso-like character.

When 50-odd judges sat down at the British Festival To judge a similar number of ales, porters and stouts, these were the characteristics they were seeking.

The best examples would remind the judges that they were smelling, tasting - and enjoying - barley malt, hops, yeast and water. !-- end pullquote --> The ingredients would be beautifully combined, but with the right accent for each style. The best beers would have their own individuality and each sip would invite another. Lots of aroma and taste - even more aftertaste.

Such attributes do not mean that a beer is necessarily either full-bodied or strong. British brewers have a genius for making beers that are light in body, modest in alcohol but full of flavour.

The judging was "blindfold" and I was a member of the panel for the final round. I was especially tempted by the beer lowest in alcohol. It turned out to be Mardler's Mild (3.6 per cent), from the Woodforde brewery of Woodbastwick, near Norwich in Norfolk.

"A hint of toffee-apples," said my tasting note. With that balance of satisfying sweetness and appetising tartness, and its gentle alcohol, I could have enjoyed it until the cows came home. It was not placed.

The taster seated next to me was an Essex cricketer Derek Pringle. Such panels often feature a celebrity, who usually turns out to favour some sugary "designer beer." Not Mr Pringle. He put his judgment on the line more than any of us. "I like the hoppiness in this bitter. I think I recognise it. Timothy Taylor's Best from Keighley, Yorkshire." He was right. This beer, at 4.0 per cent, came second. The next beer was a stronger bitter. I thought I recognised the particular aroma of a hop variety called the Fuggle. Wine writer Andrew Jefford quoted the French "decadent" novelist J K Huysmans on the "musky, cowshed aromas" of English beer. Panellist Miles Jenner, head brewer at Harvey's, of Lewes (they were not competing), found maltiness in the aroma and bitterness in the finish (aftertaste). He liked the "rising condition" (small, sustained, bubbles). I approved of the way the foam stuck to the sides, to form what brewers call "Brussels lace."

Points for appearance, arousing aroma, teasing palate and memorable finish this had to be the winner. Adnam's Extra (4.3 per cent), from Southwold, Suffolk.

It was not the strongest beer. An especially potent challenge came from Headcracker Barley Wine (7.5 percent), a second finalist from Woodforde's.

This was commended by Miles and by Catherine Maxwell Stuart, who makes her own strong ale in a castle called Traquair House, in the Borders. The Lady of Traquair thought the barley wine surprisingly easy to drink, but that useful attribute was only sufficient to gain it third place.

Afterwards, I ran into Adnams' brewer, Mike Powell-Evans, and asked him if he was still using Fuggles hops. Yes, he said, in his Extra he added them at three different stages of the brew, and featured no other variety. He conceded that the famous Goldings had a "clear, bright" aroma, but typed them as "the lyric tenor" of the hop world. In his Extra, he wanted the "beautiful, heavy, strong" aroma of the Fuggles: "The bass-baritone, the villain who appears in the last act and shoots the hero." I raised an eyebrow. "You will have to excuse me," he said. "I can't stop smiling. Adnams' Extra has just been voted Champion Beer of Britain."

Published Online: SEPT 2, 1998

Published in Print: AUG 7, 1993

In: The Independent