

Wonderful beers... must it be Europe?

(Or could the U.S. learn to recognize its own great brews?)

"Which is the best beer? What do you think of the beer in this city/state/country? Where in the world are the best beers? How do ours compare." These questions haunt my dreams, and I wake up answering them on breakfast television, in Tokyo, Toronto or heaven-knows where.

The best beer countries? The Czech Republic for the original Pilsner, not quite what it was, but still a great beer. And for Czechvar, from the town of Budweis, if you prefer slightly maltier lagers. Germany for 1,200 breweries, the Purity Law, styles ranging from Altbier to Zwickelbier. Belgium for the most idiosyncratic, individualistic, indigenous styles, beautifully served. Britain for ales. Ireland for stouts.

"So Europe is the best," says the interviewer. This is the tough part. There is no such place as Europe. Cultures may overlap in some neighbouring nations, but they remain separate countries.

I love the taverns in the Czech Republic, but many sell only one beer. Few stretch to more than one golden lager and one dark. I love drinking a fresh golden lager, full of malt and hop flavors, in an atmospheric Prague café, but I don't go to the Czech Republic for great variety. In Prague. I have never seen an Altbier or Zwickelbier, from Germany or anywhere else. There may be a bottle of this or that somewhere, in a bar for German tourists, but I have never spotted it.

In Germany, most taverns or beer gardens are either owned or exclusively supplied by one brewery. Some German breweries make only one beer. Nor does it necessarily help if, like Paulaner, they make a dozen or 20. Time and again in Germany, I am in an establishment owned by a brewer that makes one of my favorite beers, ask for it and am met by a blank look. This particular tavern does not sell that particular beer, and has no interest in discussing the question. When I finally find a tavern serving my favourite beer from a respected brewery, I discover that it has been dumbed down; or I don't find it, because the product has been discontinued. There are, of course, some wonderful taverns offering uncompromisingly flavorful beers, but don't expect a great deal of variety under one roof.

In Belgium, most cafés carry a range of styles, but constrained by their contract with one of the big two national brewers. Most major cities have at least one good specialty beer bar. The beers will predominantly be Belgian, but that is fine by me.

In Britain, I might find the odd Czech or German beer, and certainly some Belgians, though more often in supermarkets than pubs. The only Belgian at all widely available in pubs is Hoegaarden. Pubs with a more diverse selection, like the White Horse, in Parson's Green, London, are so unusual as to be celebrated. Although I am British, I am not home that much. When I am, I find a good cask-conditioned Bitter in a proper British pub a very special pleasure, and I'll usually be more than happy to settle for that. If I feel like a local beer from Ireland, the London branch of the Porterhouse is the only option.

Ireland has three major brewers and a grand total of ten brewpubs or micros. In fairness, there are only four and a half million people, both sides of the border. I have spent many an evening enjoying Guinness in Dublin, or visiting the original Porterhouse, but there are few other choices, and young seem to drink almost exclusively Budweiser.

Where would you find Czechs, Germans, Belgians, and British and Irish? In the United States, I would suggest. A hundred years ago, Czech-style lagers were being made in Texas; German wheat beers in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin; probably Belgian brews in parts of Illinois and Michigan; and styles associated with London, Burton and Tadcaster in upstate New York and New England.

Those ethnic pockets were likely to be as inward-looking as their European countries of origin. I doubt you would have found many instances of a brewery making a Czech-style lager and a German wheat beer, or a Belgian brown ale and a British Pale.

Most of the truly "ethnic" breweries were small, unable to survive Prohibition, two World Wars and the rise of national marketing. I believe that World War II was more significant than is commonly realized. People of German origin had often hidden their ethnicity, and after the war, most whites of other origins did the same. Wars between the old European nations had devastated the world. In the United States, the majority was keener than ever to be "American", to eat white bread and TV dinners, drive a gas-guzzler with tail fins, and drink Schlitz.

It was the first generation to grow up after the war that rediscovered variety - in everything from ethnic origin to beer: the generation of John Lennon, and of Woodstock.

John Lennon was a year older than me. I was one of that generation. In Britain, it was also a generation of working-class people in their teens and 20s who challenged the

middle-class values of the establishment. For the first time, jazz and rock were reviewed as previously only classical music had been; British "kitchen sink" movies challenged Hollywood sugar; photography was treated like fine art. Championing beer "against" wine was a minor gesture from the same sensibility.

Inspired by Hugh Johnson's "World Atlas of Wine", I started work on my first big beer book in 1974. At the time, there were fewer than 50 brewing companies in the United States.

Standard lagers were the principal products of even the few brewers that did have specialties: Yuengling, F.X. Matt, Genessee and Hudepohl, for example. Most of the specialties were golden cream ales and rather modest porters. Ballantine's IPA, and to a lesser extent Rainier Ale, were the only old-established specialties of any distinctiveness. Anchor was the only brewing company to rely on specialties, with no lager of any kind.

When the consumer tried to augment this meager range with imports, the choice was scarcely better. Beyond the odd heavily ethnic German bar, the unlamented Watney's, Bass and Guinness were about as good as it got.

Only in the late 1970s did a wider range from European countries enter the market, rapidly followed by microbrews in similar styles. Soon after that, European classics began to be challenged by American microbrews in the same styles. I remember talking to Jack McAuliffe about his plans for America's first microbrewery, and I have been with the program ever since.

The astonishing diversity of styles today produced in the U.S. issues from more than 1,500 breweries. The United States has the most breweries, the strongest beer (Samuel Adams' Millennium, at 20 percent), but - much more important - the greatest diversity.

Scarcely anywhere in Europe, perhaps nowhere, is it as easy to find under one roof beers brewed in the Czech Republic, Germany, Belgium and the British Isles as it is in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C, Chicago, Seattle, Portland or San Francisco. No country in Europe could remotely approach the 50-odd styles of beer that are judged each year at the Great American Beer Festival. Remember, all of those are brewed in the U.S.

I know of no brewery in Europe that matches skill and adventurousness in the manner of the Southampton Publick House (with its Eisbock and Saison, for example) or classic styles and an individual touch as Brooklyn or Victory do. I don't think any European

brewery is as committed to eclecticism as Dogfish Head or Hair of the Dog. If anyone in Europe is as enthusiastic about big, bold, flavors as Great Lakes or as stout-hearted as Kalamazoo, it is an extraordinarily well-kept secret. No European city has as many breweries as Seattle or Portland, Oregon

And where in Europe can I find Sierra Nevada Pale Ale, Celebration or Big Foot?

I fly to America every other month on average. I have been doing this for more than 20 years, and have visited every state. I come here for the beer...and interviewers still don't believe me.

Published Online: OCT 29, 2001

Published in Print: SEPT 1, 2001

In: All About Beer