

A Mild to Snap Your Braces At

For his beer of the month, Michael Jackson selects a low-alcohol brew from Walsall that goes down well with people who are not yuppie

"Don't call me a yuppie," warned the investment banker, flexing his red braces menacingly, "and don't say the White Horse is a trendy pub." The investment banker was doing something that happens 14,000 times a year at the White Horse: he was spurning the Grolsch and Michelob in favor of Highgate Mild.

Are the followers of the White Horse, in gentrified Parson's Green, West London, under the illusion that Highgate is brewed in the lofty village of that name near Hampstead? No they are not, the investment banker snapped, followed by his braces. They know perfectly well that Highgate comes from Walsall, in the heart of the mild-brewing West Midlands.

The White Horse is keen to tell customers about its beers and even sets the brews out on what looks suspiciously like a wine list. Nor does it ignore the grape: it has twice won Egon Ronay's Wine Pub of the Year Award. More recently, it has been honoured by the Campaign for Real Ale for its promotion of mild.

Once, this style of beer did not need promoting; it was on every bar. Then, for a time, it seemed to be fading away. In these days of abstemiousness, it might be due for a comeback. Most milds are low in alcohol: 3-3.5 per cent is the typical range. (The exception is another West Midlands example, the creamy Sarah Hughes Mild, brewed to a mighty 6 per cent at the Beacon pub, Sedgley, between Wolverhampton and Dudley.)

Many milds are dark brown, but, again, not all -- some have the same pale amber color as big brother bitter. Mild refers to flavor and indicates an ale accented towards lightly nutty maltiness rather than hoppy dryness or bitterness. The seasoning of hops will be with a gentle hand, and with varieties that are aromatic and flowery rather than bittering. As in bitter, there will also be a light fruitiness, imparted by the use of ale yeasts.

The barley malts that impart the dominant character to a mild have often been gently stewed to a crystal consistency or lightly roasted to what brewers call a chocolate or black style. The original idea was that these beers would be satisfying without being drying on the palate.

They were brewed not for abstemiousness, but to be consumed in quantity, especially as a restorative at harvest times. Many crops are being harvested now, so I have chosen Highgate Mild as my Beer of the Month.

Perhaps it was its rustic image that led to mild's near-demise in London, though that hardly explains its continuing popularity in places like Walsall, Wolverhampton, and Manchester. The remarkably smooth Highgate Mild, with a contemplative balance of maltiness and fruitiness, a hint of iron and a notable complexity of flavors, is available at half a dozen pubs in London and much more widely in the West Midlands.

The Highgate Brewery, built in 1895 and now a listed building, produced nothing else for a time until it received its similar, but stronger Old Ale. It remains, unusually, a specialist mild brewery and survives despite the closure of its neighbour Springfield by its mighty parent Bass.

The fabric of the brewery itself undoubtedly contributes to the character of Highgate Mild. The same yeast has been used as long as anyone remembers, and it has undoubtedly habituated itself to its surroundings.

To be precise, there are two yeasts, one embracing four strains, the other a single-cell culture. The use of five strains in all is a fiddly procedure to apply to a minor product. But the brewery is resolute in this respect. The yeasts, and the open fermentation vessels, made of oak and in some instances lined with copper, no doubt make their own contribution to the softness and smoothness of the beer.

If you live in neither London nor the West Midlands, and cannot find Highgate Mild, perhaps you qualify for one of the following: Gale's dryish Mild (another one that is gaining sales) in Surrey, Sussex, and Hampshire; Cotleigh's faintly herbal Nutcracker in Somerset; Brain's Dark, a toasty mild in south Wales; Banks' malty Mild in the Black Country; Ansell's chocolatey example in the Birmingham area; Robinson's soft, gentle, pale Mild in Greater Manchester, Thwaite's intense liquorice-like entrant in Lancashire, Tetley's rummy Mild in Yorkshire; Bateman's very smooth mild in Lincolnshire; and Adnams' firm, slightly chewy example in East Anglia.

If you live in the north-east of England, the nearest you will get is a slightly drier, more burnt-tasting Scotch Ale. In Scotland, the odd surviving counterpart is identified as 60/-.

Those are just some of my favourites. Almost 100 examples are listed in a booklet produced by Cask Mild Campaign, organised by CAMRA activists in Surrey and Hampshire. When you have picked and gathered the shopping today, stroll to the local and see if they have a harvest beer.

Published Online: OCT 1, 1997

Published in Print: SEPT 7, 1991

In: The Independent