Does the world understand Czech beers?

(Even the famous ones)

Speech by Michael Jackson at the Czech Embassy in London, at reception for the Budweiser Budvar brewery (in the U.S., this brewery's beer is labeled Czechvar).

What makes a great beer? Great ingredients and great brewers.

Everyone knows that wine is made from grapes, and that some varieties taste better than others, but consumers do not necessarily understand what beer is.

What grapes are to wine, barley is to beer. The classic barley varieties used in lager brewing worldwide have their origins historically in Moravia.

The sweetness of malted barley is balanced by the aromatic dryness of the hop blossom. The most delicately aromatic hops, and the variety most prized in lager brewing, come from Bohemia.

Moravia and Bohemia together comprise the Czech Republic.

Bohemia has a brewing tradition going back to the beginning of the last millennium, and some of the earliest writing on the art and science of beer-making. Its great brewing cities are Prague, Pilsen and Budweis.

The world's first golden lager was made at Pilsen, in 1842. The overwhelming majority of the world's golden lagers are modelled on the Czech original. Certainly every internationally known golden lager is derived from the Czech style.

Some consumers know, but many don't. Some associate the former Communist countries with poor quality products.

Czech raw materials are used throughout the world, but usually "diluted" with cheaper ingredients. The most famous Czech breweries employ more painstaking, and slower, production methods than the majority of other lager brewers.

What is the original meaning of the word "Budweiser"? It means "from Budweis". This brewing city has inspired more than one beer. If you wish to taste malt and hops, those flavours are more evident in the beers brewed in Budweis than in beers from other countries. Budvar is produced in Budweis, and nowhere else.

The original malting barley; the classic lager hop; the creation of golden lager, the world's best-known beer-style; the city that inspired the best-known brand-name in beer worldwide ... that's an extraordinary record of brewing achievement from one country.

The Czech Republic has a long history of exporting beer, but it is a small country, and can sometimes take a parochial view of its own assets. Only recently has it attempted to explain to the consumer why its beers are renowned among connoisseurs. The earlier speakers this evening touched upon these qualities, but in a piecemeal manner, and with insufficient robustness. These points need punching home, even to a friendly audience here at the embassy.

I am glad that attempts are being made to communicate the qualities of Czech beer. At the same time, the qualities must be present before they can be communicated. There is always a danger of shifting the emphasis; making concessions on quality in order to give more attention to communications and marketing.

Depend on quality, and your product will succeed even if the marketing is less than perfect. Sacrifice quality, develop a marketing dependency, and you have an escalating addiction. Marketing may give a short-term boost, but in the long term a weakened product will die of exposure. That happened in Britain to Watney's Red Barrel, and in the U.S, to Schlitz.

Budweiser Budvar is a great beer because it has great raw materials and great brewers. They produce it in a slow and painstaking way. Its integrity is best served by its being produced in its town of origin, in a region with pride in its beer.

Please keep telling the world that your beer is produced in Budweis. Most consumers do not understand this. Tell them that it is produced only in its hometown. Tell them about the way beer is made in Budweis ... in Bohemia ... in the Czech Republic.

Most of all remember that the beer's birthplace is worth proclaiming only as long as it is synonymous with those qualities. Guard the quality and you will not need to guard against foreign namesakes.

You have Budweiser Budvar beer. They don't.

They have only Budweiser.

Published: MAY 20, 2002
In: Beer Hunter Online