

My true love loves a pint of beer

Advertising has given beer drinking a masculine image and put off many potential female customers, says Michael Jackson

How was it for you? Valentine's Day, I mean. For me, the most romantic moment was when my love uttered those words of togetherness: "Let's walk down the road for a pint."

There was the walk itself: hand-in-hand, with the sense of expectation rising. Even in an inner-city street we seemed to be *Swinging Down The Lane*. Then we crossed the threshold and approached the bar. There was the incantation of the order and the slow, measured ritual of two pints being pulled and placed before us. We clinked glasses, then turned to receive the kiss of the cool liquid and the taste of earthy-sweet malt and flowery-dry, tongue-tempting hop.

There are other drinks for more tinselly manifestations of romance, but nothing quite as gently affectionate as a pint. For me, it has to be cask-conditioned ale which is neither cold nor full of wind. Happily, my love shares my taste, so there is little to decide but the choice between Young's "Ordinary" and Fuller's Chiswick Bitter. If, instead of London, we lived in our native lands, it might be a Welsh brew like Brain's Dark or a Yorkshire bitter from Joshua Tetley or Timothy Taylor. Sometimes my love feels the stir of her ethnic origins and veers toward the Dublin dry stout made by Guinness.

Every lady with whom I have enjoyed any serious friendship has shared my pleasure in a beer, whether a Bohemian or Bavarian lager, a Belgian wheat brew, a British ale, an Irish stout or something more exotic.

That a lady might enjoy a beer, especially a bitter or a stout, is contrary to a popular stereotype. Some men seem to think a female can only cope with white wine or, at most, a gin and tonic. Among these chaps are most of the brewing fraternity who, for most of the time, promote their products entirely to males. They thus cut their potential market in half.

Women were the brewers (to be precise, brewsters) in medieval times, when the whole family drank beer with its meals (because it was safer than water). There are today several women, including sisters in two Bavarian convents, who own or operate breweries.

Idealized paintings of beautiful and sophisticated women featured in 1890s beer advertising, but today the images are predominantly male. I suspect this obsession with masculinity grew with industrialization. Beer has many qualities besides being quenching, but that made it the favoured beverage of men who cut canals, built railways, mined coal, and smelted steel. In the days when men believed that only they worked, the pint was an inexpensive reward for labours. The place of its presentation was a male preserve to which access was, for a young man, a rite of passage into adult life.

The unfamiliar flavors of that initial pint could be difficult to enjoy at first, but no young man would risk admitting that. He persisted and soon came to enjoy beer like no other drink. There was something to be said for such an initiation. It demonstrated that the greatest pleasures are not instant and taught novices to appreciate flavor as well as the other aspects of beer.

These lessons were lost as Britain's ales, many of which are very hoppy in palate, forfeited half of their market to greatly blandified adaptations of "foreign" lagers. Today, the young are weaned on these brews. Men drink more of them than women do, even though the brewing industry conceived these products as a token offering to ladies.

As men do not have a monopoly on blinkers, many women are happy to collude with the notion that a glass of lager is somehow more feminine than an ale. Perhaps that is because they believe a golden lager is less filling than a copper-colored ale or an ebony stout. That is not necessarily true. Color has no connection with calories, body, or strength.

Ladies of my acquaintance who enjoy a good brew observe that many lagers are very carbonic, while cask-conditioned ales and draught stouts are less so. Drink a cold, highly carbonated lager and you will soon feel as though you have swallowed a brick. This is because the warmth of the stomach invites the carbon dioxide to rush out of the brew. A less carbonic ale or stout will not unleash such a reaction.

Any novice drinker who is emboldened to explore beers is likely to acquire a taste for the clean, sweet flavors of malt before the drier, and sometimes bitter, characteristics of hops. Any lady who would like to put a toe into the beer might find a malty ale (such as Samuel Smith's) or a creamy draught stout surprisingly amenable.

I do not suggest that the brewing industry's neglect of women should be replaced by the development of beers designed for ladies. That would be equally sexist, and also

patronizing. In our ability to appreciate good beer, the only difference between us is that, on average, women are smaller and some may feel over-faced by a pint. There are always halves.

I believe it is the ads, not the products, that steer many women away from beer. I feel sorry for those ladies who miss this great pleasure. Not to mention those male partners unable to celebrate Valentine's Day with the clink of beer glasses.

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