

CRAFT BEER

THE BULLIES BEHIND THE BEARDS

Anyone who's ever chatted over a pint with me will confirm that I relish a bar room debate. So, I'll kick off with a contentious statement: There are no boring beers, and there are no bad beer choices. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that there is magic and wonder in even the humblest of brews.

Beer is, in itself, a little bit miraculous. I find it incredible, in the literal sense of the word, that our Neolithic hunter-gatherer ancestors appear to have worked out the basic principles of converting grain into beer a couple of millennia before they bothered getting around to knocking up a wheel.

For me, that's evidence that humankind has always been pretty much spot-on with its priorities. Why bother to fag all the way over to the next cave when there's beer on tap?

Today's beer community, however such a thing is defined, generally likes to present itself as being pretty liberal, with a small 'l', and inclusive. There's much talk of 'collaboration' and 'fusion'. Brewers will tell you how they regularly swap hops with rivals, and pubs how they'll happily lend a barrel or two to a competitor whose supplies have run low.

Craft beer in particular, rejoices in its image of cheerful folk handing out hop-infused joy to one and all, like hipster versions of Santa Claus.

That's not to say you don't stumble across the occasional a*se. In fact, I've no doubt there are some participants in those aforementioned bar room debates who'll include me in that category. For the most part, though, the reality reflects the image. You'll meet some interesting, passionate, clever and very funny people in the beer sector.

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There is, nevertheless, also a dark side. There's casual sexism in the way some breweries name their beer and illustrate their labels and pump clips, something which doesn't help efforts to broaden the appeal of beer to the female demographic.



Sadly, there is also a certain amount of covert bullying. I was unfortunate enough to witness an incident first hand at a recent industry event. A young man, clearly something of a novice in the beer style stakes, was contemplating the range of beers on offer at a bar run by a group of craft brewers.

Two members of bar staff, apparently shielded from observing normal standards of human decency by their impressively waxed and groomed facial hair, initially ignored his questions in favour of continuing their own conversation. When he pressed his inquiry, they were curt, unhelpful and shared a slight twinkle of contempt at some of his more basic questions about flavour and style.

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I stepped in to make a suggestion, which he accepted with thanks and stepped away from the fray. I've no idea whether he was a humble office junior in his first week on the job, or the heir to a vast pub empire able to order a thousand kegs at the click of a mouse. The point is, neither did those smug bar staff. What they chose to do was revel in the advantage they felt their beer knowledge gave them over an acolyte, rather than pass it on.

Charlie McVeigh, owner of the Draft House chain of pubs, told me not so long ago that one of his challenges is reining in the beer geeks on his bar teams. He says: “They want to have the latest extreme sour beer or whatever, and that passionate knowledge and diversity of beer is what sets our business apart. At the same time, I have to remind them that 90% of the customers who walk in don't have a clue.”

Beer sales are currently on the increase for the first time in a generation, and it's the beers at the more interesting end of the spectrum, such as cask ale, craft beer and world lager, that are leading the charge. However, in terms of the total market, consumer penetration for these categories is still just in single figures.

As Charlie recognises, the potential big wins come from persuading mainstream drinkers to be a little more adventurous, not from deterring them with snide smoke-and-mirrors. Key to his approach is to have familiar beers on the bar alongside the more extreme brewers, and to celebrate every beer ordered with equal joy.

I know I'm not immune. My wife likes to point out that when the UK was initially assaulted by a wave of US beers delighting in exotic names such as Miller, Coors and Budweiser, I was first in the queue to put aside my pint of ale and give them a go. So when I turn my nose up at the offer on one of those brands today, she quite rightly calls me up on it.

Which tells you not only a lot about how little store Mrs P sets in my status as a beer guru, but also that, even in our courting days, a trip to the local was about as far as I was prepared to push the boat out.

Even so, I'll repeat my contention: There are no boring beers. The wondrous combination of science and art that makes yeast, malt, water and hops do their thing is something to be marvelled at with every sip.

There are, however, some very boring beer drinkers. Talk to me, by all means. Let's have that bar room debate. Tell me why you're enjoying your beer of choice – but please don't tell me I've chosen the wrong beer simply because I haven't ordered the same as you, or because I occasionally drink something that actually comes with its own marketing budget. If you do, the only thing I've chosen poorly is my drinking companion.

John Porter, beer writer and sommelier

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