

THE BEER EXPERIENCE

Great beer can be at the heart of the experiential economy, argues beer writer and sommelier, John Porter.



Picture it. You've had a rough day at the office, but it's finally over. You're in the pub and the banter is flowing freely. There, sitting on the bar is a pint with

your name on it. A drop of condensation slides down the glass like a tear of joy. A dancing ray of evening sunshine briefly shines through the warm, amber hue of the beer, as if it were stained glass in a medieval cathedral.

The savoury, spice aroma of English hops catches your nose. Finally, you raise the glass to your lips and... bingo!

So, please don't tell me that drinking beer isn't an experience. When it's well brewed, well looked after and well poured, it's one of the finest experiences life has to offer.

The experiential economy is, we are told, here to stay and expected to grow further during 2019. People don't 'just' go out any more, they demand to be entertained. Now, I have no problem with pubs that offer their customer shuffleboard, escape rooms, open mic nights and any of the other many ways that pubs can -

and always have done - engage with customers looking for more than a pint and a chat.

However, there is an opportunity to bring beer front-and-centre as part of a vibrant on-trade scene. In Prague earlier in the year, a seasoned bartender poured me one of that great beer city's light-and-dark serves, a layered beer with light and dark beer topped by a thick, foamy head. In the best Belgian beer cafés, the bar staff would consider it a failure if any two different beers were served in the same glass.

Beer is such an integral part of UK pub life that it's perhaps understandable that it can sometimes seem to be just part of the furniture. It also had to be acknowledged that too many pubs let themselves down with indifferent quality or poorly served beer.

Range is key. The bar-top is the front line, and a differentiated choice of cask and keg brands should include a choice of styles and a mix of familiar and smaller brewers. The fridge is the next line of defence, where canned and bottled beers with a longer shelf life than draught products allow a greater depth of choice.

Ways to add theatre to the beer offer include:

- Beer lists - whether in print or on a screen, a simple list of the name, strength, style and flavour of every beer on offer helps raise customer awareness;
- Beer and food matching - include a recommended beer or beer style pairing alongside dishes on the menu;
- Tutored tastings - invite a local brewer or, of course, a beer sommelier to host a beer tasting evening - and involve staff as well as customer to boost awareness.

For many pubs, this isn't just a plug-and-play option. There is work to be done in terms of raising their game, with the latest Cask Report telling us that too much beer is served past its best or at the wrong temperature. By getting it right, the opportunity is as clear as a well-pulled pint.