



MASH TUN

COPPER

The Sky's The Limit

Pilot Breweries

The installation of a pilot plant gives brewers the chance to let their creative juices flow, with some very exciting results, as John Porter discovers

One consequence of the craft beer revolution is a new breed of disloyal consumer who is looking for a different hop hit every time they go to the bar. But Britain's family brewers haven't notched up a couple of millennia of combined experience between them without learning how to adapt to changing consumer demands, and if variety is what the customer demands, then variety is what they will get.

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Simon Dodd, managing director of the Fuller's Beer Company, sets out the challenge. "Ten years ago, we were one of two brewers left in London. Operators would phone us up asking for London Pride, and we could pretty much choose where to put the brand and where not to.

"Wind the clock forward, and there are now over 100 breweries in London alone. The CGA stat is that in the past three years, 2,800 new beer products have been brought to market, versus just 300 10 years ago. That tells you that choice is everywhere, and we can either put our head in the sand, or we can evolve our range to meet changing consumer demand and offer choice."

Small Batch, Big Choice

One of the issues is that most established breweries are set up to produce fairly long runs of a relatively small range of beers. In response, alongside their main production facility, an increasing number run pilot breweries, a more flexible installation enabling brewers to try short runs of new ideas, as well as meet consumer demand for continual innovation.

September 2018 saw the opening of Fuller's own pilot brewery, located in the expanded and revamped shop at the Griffin Brewery in Chiswick.

Able to produce 10 barrels of beer per brew, which can be packaged in bottle, cask or keg, the plant's shiny stainless steel kit is on show and very much part of the visitor experience.

Fuller's head brewer, Georgina Young, says: "Prior to this, the smallest batch we could brew was 160 barrels, so we tended always to play safe with flavours. We're using the new brewery for trial-testing different raw materials such as new malts, hops, herbs, spices and fruits."

On tap at the opening of the pilot brewery were beers including a 4.8% Thai Stout laced with lemongrass and pepper flavours, an ideal match with the fresh Thai food served in a number of Fuller's pubs. "One advantage of the pilot brewery is that we can produce different beers for our different styles of pubs," says Young. As well as allowing pub teams to come into the brewery and create exclusive beers for their customers, the pilot will also play a role in training new brewers.

Pioneering Pilots

The Fuller's plant was some time in the planning, and other brewers will point out that they were definitely sooner to the party. St Austell opened its current pilot brewery in 2016, but this replaced a previous small batch plant which, as brewing director Roger Ryman explains, produced the original brew runs of current St Austell favourites such as Tribute and Proper Job.

"Our small two-and-a-half barrel brewery was already there when I took over in 1999, and I'd go as far as to say all of our current beer range has come out of it," says Ryman. The new pilot brewery enables St Austell to produce two distinct ranges of short run beers - the Small Batch Beer Club, a cask offer, and the World Beer Series, a bottled range.

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Limited Editions

The Small Batch Beer Club currently has around 40 pubs signed up. The programme is planned seasonally, with nine limited edition cask beers produced on the pilot brewery across each four month cycle, and each pub in the programme receiving a cask of each beer.

Beers produced for the club during 2018 included Beekeeper's Brew, a 3.8% ABV ale made with Cornish honey; the 5% ABV Vanilla and Bourbon Porter, and Cascadia Beckons, a 3.9% ABV pale ale. The programme also includes collaborations such as Miss Nancy Blair, a 3.8% ABV sparkling Aussie Pale Ale, brewed with yeast from Australian brewer Cooper's.

"There are no reorders and no returns," says Ryman. "In the right pubs, this is the kind of choice they want to offer their customers. My aspiration is that we try not to follow trends, we try to create them."

However, he acknowledges that the nature of the cask beer market favours beers between around 3.5% and 5% ABV, and that he also gets the occasional gripe from pubs in the programme when a particular beer is a slower mover.

"They might tell me that they can't sell a darker beer as quickly. There is sometimes a sense that consumers want variety, but not too much variety. Cornwall is also a relatively conservative market, and that to a degree curtails some of the more experimental brews we might put into cask."

The World Beer Series, with bottles sold mainly through the brewery shop, "is where we can push the envelope a little bit more, with the advantage that putting it in bottles gives you a longer shelf life." Recent examples include several beers that reflect Ryman's passion for Belgian beer styles, including Cardinal Syn Abbey Dubbel at 7.8% ABV, and Bad Habit Abbey Trippel 8.2%.

The World Beer series also includes collaborations, notably Black Square Russian Imperial Stout brewed with Moscow's New Riga's Brewery. "They are all what I would describe as our interpretations of classic styles," says Ryman.

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Old Brewer, New Brews

Across the country in Kent, Britain's oldest brewer is also reaping the benefits of being able to experiment on its pilot plant.

Mike Unsworth head brewer at Shepherd Neame, says: "It allows you to explore new styles and tastes and also enables feedback to refine new beers and lagers. It's difficult to experiment and test out new styles when your minimum run is 100 barrels, and all core beers were once new.

"Drinkers today are more beer-savvy than ever, they've been exposed to more beer styles than previous generations and quite rightly they want more choice.

"Our Bear Island East Coast Pale Ale began life as a short-run, as did the Whitstable Bay range and our Five Grain Lager, so there's not any particular style. It's more about interesting taste profiles and the age old test of whether or not after your first pint of something, you want another one."

