

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NORDIC BEER PROJECT

— PART ONE

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After having written an editorial in the latest issue – No. 3, 2012 – of the SBR on the potential of using unique Nordic raw materials in our own local beers and, based on these raw materials and a lot of other factors, possibly create some unique, indigenously Nordic beer styles, I have to admit that the idea has haunted me constantly. This to the extent that I believe that pursuing this goal is not only an excellent idea for the brewing industry in our region, but it is in fact something that is bound to happen.



The concept of 'flavourful, local, indigenous and unique' is indisputably one of the strongest and I believe most durable current trends within all things that have to do with food and drink in the western world. Thus, after realising this, I have embarked on a crusade – with support from a very good friend of mine, and one of the most visionary, creative and imaginative personalities on the Nordic brewing scene, Per Kølster, formerly of Fuglebjerggaard. My aim is to make sure that this process is started, supported and to some extent coordinated. And it is obvious that the medium through which I will inform the world at large about the progress within the Nordic Beer Project will be the SBR! Our campaign starts in this issue with an introductory article by Per Kølster on the back of this one by me. Be prepared for lots more on this topic in the future...

In my editorial in this issue of the SBR, I have tried to boil the entire concept of Nordic beer down to something as tangible and short as possible, knowing very well that without doing so the whole idea will seem as very, very airy, ambitious and out of touch with reality. Thus, if you have not yet read the editorial, please do so before embarking on this much longer, much more theoretical and much more detailed description of the whos, hows, whens and what fors of the concept of Nordic beer – the development of our own, new, tasty, unique and indigenous beer styles. So, allow me to begin by repeating the vision of the concept as also stated in my editorial:

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE NORDIC BEER PROJECT

To create one or more unique and novel categories of Nordic beers that owe their distinct aroma, flavour and taste character to both novel ingredients and novel techniques applied in the production of the brewing ingredients, from the selection of cultivars, through breeding, growing and processing of these to their final use in the brewing processes.

This objective shall be met by mobilising joint efforts of the excellent human and institutional resources in the Nordic region that are involved with plant breeding, farming, crop processing and brewing, while also utilising the unique Nordic 'terroir' – soil conditions, climate and hours of daylight – as well as the indigenous biology as conserved in gene-banks.

INTRODUCTION

The beer culture in the Nordic region is rich, and we have a strong and vibrant brewing industry – as is apparant from the magazine you are currently reading among others – with large



WHAT I PROPOSE UNDER THE NAME 'NORDIC BEER' IS THAT WE INVENT A WHOLE NEW CATEGORY OF BEERS. USING NEW RAW MATERIALS, PRODUCED BY NEW PROCESSES, BREWING THESE BEERS WITH NOVEL TECHNIQUES THAT SHOULD BE ADAPTED TO THE PROPERTIES OF THESE NOVEL MATERIALS WITH THE AIM TO PRODUCE BEERS WITH NOVEL AROMA, FLAVOUR AND TASTE CHARACTERISTICS THAT WILL FASCINATE THE WORLD!



and small breweries that are world class, measured by any standard. Our markets may, like the beer markets all over the world, be dominated by lager beers, but these are of excellent quality. And side by side with these lagers, we have a multitude of other beer styles, offered not only by the smaller craft oriented breweries, but also by many of the bigger breweries.

Still, we are, like the rest of the Western world, seeing a decline in overall per capita beer consumption. The sales of the specialty beers are increasing year by year, but this can by no means compensate for the decline in the mainstream – no offense meant – lager segments of the market. There are very many explanations for this decline – political, social, demographic and consumer behavioural – as very often discussed in the SBR. But this is not the topic for discussion in this article and those that will follow under the 'Nordic Beer' headline. Instead, I shall present a potential strategy that may form part of the solution – i.e. an initiative that might help reverse the trend of falling beer production, sales and consumption in our region.

In my editorial in SBR No. 3, 2012, I mentioned it is my conviction that the long-term success of the Nordic craft brewing industry requires differentiation. Why this is important to the smaller craft breweries is rather self-evident. At the same time, in the other end of the industry, our large breweries' lagers have proven more than capable of competing on the international stage with the rest of the megabrewers of this world. But I wonder if they would not in the long run →

also benefit significantly from offering products – at home and abroad – that are unique to themselves and the area, country or region they come from? Initially, such novel beers would probably only be a small, but lucrative niche in their portfolios. But, if done right, this niche can increasingly grow bigger volume-wise and, thus, become even more profitable, while at the same time giving these breweries a more distinct profile in the market. And although I'm as far away from marketing management on megabrewery scale as I can possibly get within this industry, I will still bet that 'a more distinct profile' is very high on the wish list of these marketing managers. Ask any of them...!

Someone might argue that Nordic beers already exist, because there are quite a few beers out there with names and romantic marketing claims that they are based on recipes that are anything from a hundred to several thousand years old. Although these beers often attract some well meaning attention from beer writers and enthusiasts, my view is that they have next to nothing to do with those older beers they claim to be interpreting. One factor supporting my view is that there are no meaningful recipes for any beer more than 150 years or so old. Either these were never written down, or if they were, they use a language and a terminology that makes no sense today. Not an empty statement from a brewer who has tried to recreate a medieval beer from Funen, where one of the prescriptions was to '...boil the water for brewing with a goodly amount of fir branches...!' In later historical recipes, there are actual, quantitative, written malt and hop bills. But what does this help when we have no idea of the most basic quality parameters like extract, colour and modification of these malts, or of alfa acid contents, resins and oil fractions in the hops? So, how do the modern beers brewed on malt from Germany, hops from England and yeast from the US qualify as being indigenously Nordic?

Be this as it may – it is not my objective to ridicule brewers who try to brew historical beers. The argument I wish to underline is that the brewing of 'pseudo-historical' beers is not a very viable route to inventing a new category of beers. What I am ever so slowly moving towards proposing in this article is neither to try to truly simulate the Nordic beers of the past – absolutely nobody would dream of drinking these! Nor do I propose that we, in order to call our beers 'Nordic', just start

locally producing the same raw materials that we are currently importing. If those materials are still the same – and they will more likely even be inferior in technical quality – the marketing of them as 'local' would be a bit like performing a brewery version of 'The Emperor's New Clothes'.

THE NORDIC BEER IDEA

What I propose under the name 'Nordic beer' is that we invent a whole new category of beers. Using new raw materials, produced by new processes, brewing these beers with novel techniques that should be adapted to the properties of these novel materials with the aim to produce beers with novel aroma, flavour and taste characteristics that will fascinate the world!

How many styles and beer types this would eventually encompass, I have no idea of! How could I have, as the whole concept does not yet exist? But I see absolutely no reason why this new universe of Nordic beers may not over a couple of decades be at least as big as the whole currently existing universe of beer styles combined. And, like any other category of beers, the Nordic beer universe would forever keep growing and evolving, owing to the creativity and experience gained by all the stakeholders – or as I have chosen to call these as a group, the 'supply chain of Nordic beer' – in the category.

I believe that this very ambitious goal is achievable simply because, once it gets started, the only limiting factor will be the combined imaginations of the all the different contributors in the 'supply chain of Nordic beer'. But do not misunderstand me: What I'm saying is definitely not that this will be easy – quite the opposite: It will be an enormous task involving a lot of different players – all those that I collectively call the 'supply chain' – working together for a very long time with no guarantee of success and no specific, tangible objectives or success criteria defined from the start.

THE NORDIC BEER 'SUPPLY CHAIN'

High time now to explain what I mean by the 'supply chain' mentioned several times above. This supply chain consists of all the different 'institutions' that need to be involved in order for the process to get started and hopefully eventually succeed. And the list of these 'institutions' will, as I see it, be as follows:



1. The political system from the EU to the local municipalities. The role of these is to create the formal framework and the financing for the development work.
2. The scientific/academic system – private as well as public – that holds all the basic knowledge and the research capability needed to support the project. From experts in cultivars and agronomy to sensory and marketing experts.
3. Commercial plant breeders, holding the practical know-how on how to introduce new, viable crops onto the market.
4. The growers of the commercial crops – cereals for malting or raw use in brewing, hops, growers of other ‘non-traditional’ ingredients that may find use in the beers. These growers will produce the raw materials for our Nordic beers.
5. The ‘processors’ – maltsters, hop processors, producers of commercial herbal, fruit and other relevant products for use in the food industry, as these will turn the new raw materials into brewing materials in a knowledge-founded respect for the properties of the raw materials as well as in an understanding of what the brewers are looking for.
6. The end users – the brewers. Obviously, these are responsible

for the final step in this ‘supply chain’, namely converting the results of the previous links in the chain into the unique, flavourful and intriguing new beers that shall earn the term Nordic beers. And doing so not just as customers to the processors, but more as just the final link in an actively communicating and collaborating entity, by me termed the supply chain.

This was an answer to the question of who will be responsible for the creation of the Nordic beers. Having this at hand, the next question is obviously the ‘How?’ – A true cliffhanger, I know, but you will have to hold your breath for another month or so until we get back to this in the second part of this article, which will be featured in the next issue of the SBR, scheduled for December 2012. ¹