

# DEBATE SECTION

## The Image and Knowledge of Beer

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What can we do to move forward?



In our little corner of the big world, we have been so lucky as to see a whole new dimension of the universe of beer emerging over the past two to three decades. I am of course referring to the craft beer revolution that has swept over all of Scandinavia in the past decade; Denmark, especially, to an extent that this country in a period of just six to

seven years has gone from being the country in Europe with the lowest number of breweries per capita to the one with the highest in the world. At the same time, the craft beer movement has made serious inroads at all larger breweries, as well.

Today, breweries in Scandinavia, large and small, share the view that this development is entirely good. Not only does it provide all of us with a market that is highly profitable, but it has elevated the image of beer in the eyes of the media and the general public from being something rather dull and industrial to something interesting, very varied, innovative and craft-oriented. Many now consider beer at least on par with wine in sophistication and depth with relation to how, from what and by whom it is brewed. To many people, beer has become a hobby and a passion, and not just a drink they enjoy after mowing the lawn, at football matches or when we go out to have serious fun. Not to mention the park benches...

But I think we also all agree that we have a long way to go. We all know that we have yet to reach the majority of the people who, given the right exposure and introduction to the universe of craft beer, would actually become regular consumers and

customers. How do we reach them? Should we just sit back and wait until these people are brought over by the 'word of mouth' method? Or what are the alternative options?

Using the traditional mass marketing methods is for simple price reasons out of reach for the vast majority of craft brewers, but nor does it not seem to be the right approach for more fundamental reasons. Enjoying and appreciating specialty beer is something that involves so many complex factors, also beyond the taste, the flavour and the amazing story behind each of these beers. The whole sense of magic and mystery, the ambience, the opportunity to discuss the beer, to ask questions about it, and to communicate the sense of individuality in one's choice of beer at that particular moment and that particular context is just too much to get across in a 15-second TV commercial. Or on a full-page in a life-style magazine. And even if we could, would many of the potential consumers we are trying to reach not simply dismiss the message anyway? Simply because they feel too sophisticated and intelligent to be communicated to through such mundane media? Maybe this is the reason why expensive wines are never marketed that way either?

My conclusion, based on now almost ten years of experience in this field, is that there are two things that work when it comes to reaching these groups of potential customers: Making them try the beer while being given the full 'song and dance' about all the things that make this beer unique. Or by having them read about it in a newspaper or magazine they trust, and written by an 'expert' they trust, too. In theory quite simple, but in practice very difficult, as it requires a direct contact to and persuasion of either the potential consumer or the journalist. But there is one type of event that, if done right, will bring both the potential customers and the media right to where you, as a brewer, are,

and in huge numbers within a very short time frame, too. Yes, you guessed it: I'm talking about beer festivals!

In Denmark, we have had large-scale beer festivals for more than ten years now. Organised by the consumer organisation Danske Ølentusiaster (Danish Beer Enthusiasts), and in Copenhagen attracting an audience of 10-15,000 people during three festival days. Throughout the first seven to eight years of this millennium, it was like the Chinese economy these days: massive growth in sheer numbers, year on year, and thus also a lot of new people through the doors every year. No surprise, as beer those years was one of hottest and most trendy 'new' things out there (documented by several market research surveys). The concept of these festivals is unbelievably simple: A large number of breweries serving an enormous number of different beers from mostly almost ridiculously primitive booths. And absolutely nothing else... As the readers of the SBR are highly intelligent people, there is absolutely no reason to explain in detail what happened to these festivals when beer all of a sudden was not the undisputed 'flavour of the month', literally speaking. The sad thing is, however, that the organisers do not seem to see a problem in the fact that it is only their members that come back year after year. The friends they used to be able to drag along to the festival don't bother to come any more, but what the heck – the members still get to meet their fellow member friends, and they get to taste all the new beers released by the breweries during the past year. And if we subjected them to a polygraph test, they would admit that this is precisely why they run the festivals anyway.

My point is that the focus of any event will inevitably be a simple consequence of the interests of those who organise it. A very theoretical analysis, some would say, but the fact is that, to me, this only became crystal clear within the past year as

I, during this year, have had the opportunity to attend three other festivals in other countries organised by other 'interests' than the consumers: The Stockholm Beer & Whisky Festival and the Mondial de la Bière in Strasbourg, both organised by private, commercial companies, and the Great American Beer Festival in Denver, CO, organised by the Brewers Association, i.e. the breweries. The details on how the two latter festivals are organised and how many things beyond and around the beer itself they include can be found elsewhere in this issue of the SBR, so let me for the sake of brevity limit myself to the headlines: These other festivals include foods and other beverages, they cater specifically for the needs and interests of the media, they are professionally marketed, they include entertainment – magicians, karaoke, music and dancing, etc. – and they give festival-goers the chance to explore and often even taste the aspects of beer they might be curious to explore – from beer and food matching to professional beer tasting. In other words, they are inviting to a much, much wider group of people than just the die-hard beer geeks.

To me, it is no surprise that these 'alternative' festival concepts are highly successful, and in particular the GABF. Now running on something close to its 30th year, but continuously re-inventing itself and being more successful than ever.

I am not saying that beer festivals are the only way to get more people converted to good beer – professional beer competitions springs to mind as another avenue to explore, and one that is sadly absent in Scandinavia (with the exception of Stockholm at the festival there) – but I'm saying that it is there for us as a proven way to reach the goal. And I'm also saying that if we as brewers want to exploit this option, we have to make sure that we also get our foot under the table so that the festivals will fulfil our needs and wishes.