

# DRINKABILITY: COUNTERING A DASH TO THE EXTREME

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Drinkability of beer is crucial to any brewer; however, two rather opposing definitions have evolved within the industry. In this article, Professor Lewis gives us a very personal look at the concept of drinkability.

Drinkability is the brewer's mantra and holy grail: a beer should not be satiating or filling, it should be more-ish, crisp not heavy, tasty but not fatiguing and should leave the consumer satisfied but willing and able to have another. The reason is simple: (a) the profit is somewhere in the last bottle of the six-pack and (b) the sooner that is gone the sooner it must be replaced. And therein lies something of a dilemma for an industry that preaches moderation: drinkability is a trait that is intended to encourage consumption. For craft brewers, however, the issue is somewhat different, because they may parse the word drinkability in a different way from my definition. They may equate drinkability with preference or liking or distinction or even with inventiveness, rarity, and cutting edge uniqueness. There is therefore a trend within the domestic and craft segments to move to the extremes, one in the lighter direction and the other heavier. While heavier beers are fascinating avenues of brewing arts and science to explore, there is some danger of leaving the consumer far behind. The astonishing success of lime flavoured light beers does nothing to convince me that the American consumer in general is starved of Russian Imperial Stouts, for example, and is clamouring for them, interesting though such beers are. The micro-craft brewing segment of the industry as well as American large-scale brewers need to think about drinkability in different ways. For both segments the old idea of full flavour, flavour balance, distinction, character and deliciousness might provide a clue to the future.

## WHAT IS DRINKABILITY?

The word drinkability has been around the brewing industry for many years. Though the chemistry and even sensory science of drinkability may well be lacking, brewers, and indeed the consuming public, know drinkability when they experience it. In classical terms, a beer with high drinkability is not satiating or filling but is more-ish, crisp not heavy, tasty but not fatiguing and should leave the customer satisfied but willing and able to have another one. My model is an American lager or a pint of ordinary British bitter in an English pub; such beers might be called session beers. Drinkability is not so much the experience of the first drink from a glass of beer, but the sensation of drinkability (or not!) is usually well-developed by the last drink. This is very much the view of drinkability of the American large-scale brewing industry and that mind set has persuaded those brewers to pursue ever-lighter beers. This is in large part perfectly justified by the success of products whose lightness is well-expressed in their lack of carbohydrates or calories, colour, flavour and even personality. Packaging innovations, such as vortex bottles and cases with holes, may serve to distinguish a beer more than the product that the packages contain. Thus, there is a gradual departure to the extremes of flavour deprivation that approach non-beeriness and have now come to include the use of non-beer additions to boost flavour. However, no-one is foolish enough to argue with success, but merely cries into one's beer over the modern trend away from beers of substance and character.



**THUS, WHAT CONCERNS ME IS NOT THAT EXTREME BEERS APPEAR IN THE MARKETPLACE, BUT THAT EXTREME BEERS BECOME THE OBJECTIVE OR AMBITION OF CRAFT BREWING AND CRAFT BREWERS IN GENERAL AND THAT THIS FAR-AWAY, ADVENTUROUS, EXTREME TAIL STARTS TO WAG THE CRAFT BREWING DOG**



Beers of substance and character, however, are the stock-in-trade of the micro-brewing or craft-brewing industry. That segment has traditionally sought to distinguish itself from the macro-domestic industry by typically making ales more than lagers and *inter alia* by including substantial levels of hop bitterness, by the adventurous use of specialty malts and roasted materials, by all-malt brewing and high gravity alcoholic beers, and by finishing processes that eschew, for example, pasteurisation. As the success of light beers has caused the macro-domestic industry to make ever-lighter beers, so the success of many highly characteristic beers leads the craft industry to the opposite extreme and, ultimately, to a different definition of drinkability that drives this trend. That definition might equate drinkability with preference or liking or distinction or even with inventiveness, rarity, and cutting edge uniqueness.

#### **THE CONSEQUENCES IN TERMS OF BREWING PHILOSOPHIES**

There is therefore a trend within the macro-domestic and craft segments to move to the extremes, one in the lighter direction and the other heavier or much heavier.

The craft-brewing segment of the industry is vibrant and active and immensely proud of the products it makes and the position it holds in the market place as the purveyors of beers of traditional styles plus new and interesting ones. The brewers in the craft segment are among the

most adventurous and creative brewers on the planet and many are attracted as a dog to bacon by the prospect of new approaches; the background of many as home brewers persuades them to follow their own noses rather than gauging the needs of their customers. Among such developments, *inter alia*, are extremes of blackness and bitterness intensity, use of wet or fresh hop, and sour beers with lactic and acetic fermentations and use of *Brettanomyces* yeasts for primary fermentation. Now, there is no doubt that a few expert brewers have identified a small and specialised niche in the marketplace that they have been able to exploit quite brilliantly, but this iconic success of a few draws along many other brewers who, because of their market, their skills, their equipment and processes, would be well advised to stick to their knitting of making the outstanding beers with which they are familiar. After all, the piano of raw materials that brewers play upon and flavour chords they can strike with their processes is amazingly and satisfyingly varied within what we might call the standard range. Most craft brewers therefore should resist the escape to the extreme.

#### **WRONG CRAFT BREWER MARKETING STRATEGY?**

Thus, what concerns me is not that extreme beers appear in the marketplace, but that extreme beers become the objective or ambition of craft brewing and craft brewers in general and that →

this far-away, adventurous, extreme tail starts to wag the craft brewing dog.

While extreme craft-brewed beers are fascinating avenues of brewing arts and science to explore, there is real danger of leaving the consumer far behind. The astonishing success of flavoured light and ultra-light beers does nothing to convince me that the American consumer in general is starved of Russian Imperial Stouts, for example, and is clamouring for them, interesting though such beers are.

In fact, if one looks rationally at the craft segment, what is surprising is not its success, but rather the lack of it. After all, craft beers have existed in this country for over 30 years and so a second generation and perhaps a third generation of beer drinkers has come to maturity knowing only a beer world in which craft beers exist. There are now some 1,600 craft breweries across the USA and so most of the US population must live near at least one of them. Craft brewers have gotten, and still get, the kind of free press the macro-domestic industry can only dream about, and craft brews dominate the shelf space in most retail outlets. And, yet, craft beers command less than five per cent of the market and a quarter of that slice is owned by one company; there are no regional breweries: those breweries that are successful have, for the most part, a national and even an international presence. This could be taken as evidence that the craft brewers have already left in the lurch many consumers they should be attracting, and the further dash to the extreme, which I identify above, may well be counterproductive to the point of causing dangerous disaffection among those consumers, who might otherwise explore the world of craft brews.

#### FUTURE POSSIBILITIES – ALES VS. LAGERS

And so as the macro-domestic industry departs in one direction and the micro-craft brewers in the other, it seems to me that there is a significant and exploitable lacuna in the middle. I don't much care who fills this space, but I think the craft industry is the more likely to grow into it. Frankly, I would like that because, many moons ago, I predicted the craft industry, by now, would own much more of the market than it does.

I recently took a month-long trip through the Baltic States and Russia and returned to the USA via the United Kingdom. To tell the truth, I had not expected much of a beer journey and so I was amazed and delighted by the excellent beers I encountered. They were characteristic, different over a broad range, very flavourful, delicious and well-balanced and, dare I say it, highly drinkable. Moreover, they were invariably presented beautifully at the right temperature, beading to support the foam throughout and, without fail, in an interesting glass imprinted with the logo of the brewery. I was impressed. All the beers were lagers except in the UK where I dabbled with a few ales, all of which, incidentally, met the description given in this paragraph. The first beer I had upon my return to the USA deeply disappointed me: it met my old description of a craft-brewed beer that I thought I would never again need to use: 'cold, flat, hazy, no-foam, bitter beer served in a jam jar'.

This European experience has persuaded me that, if the lacuna I identify in the beer market in this country is to be filled, it will be filled with characteristic lager beers. Brewers traditionally ascribe to lagers such general descriptors as

#### BACKGROUND

Through Finn Bjørn Knudsen – a long time member of the Danish Brewers' Guild, but since many years based in Colorado, USA, where he is the chairman of the local branch of the MBAA (Master Brewers' Association of the Americas) – we have been privileged to source papers that have been presented at various meetings of the MBAA. The first of these is a paper on drinkability by Professor Emeritus Michael

Lewis, ex. University of California, Davis, USA, home to the most highly recognised brewing education in the US, and where Michael Lewis, very well-deserved, has achieved iconic status.

The paper was presented at the 2009 Conference of MBAA and in 2010 at the Craft Brewers Conference and at the District Rocky Mountain meeting of MBAA.

elegant, subtle and sophisticated (wine-type words, I know) in contrast to ales, which might be called e.g. robust. American craft brewers have not merely imitated Old World ales, but have re-invented them to create something that is uniquely American. I see no reason why the same talent and inventiveness should not do the same for lagers. The old idea of full flavour, flavour balance, distinction, character and deliciousness might provide a clue to the future. The craft industry has already made a start on this journey and there are a number of splendid lagers appearing in the market place and I don't doubt more to come. During a recent drive through Oregon, the Pacific Northwest and Western Canada, and with this article in mind, I asked a dozen or more bartenders in brewpubs to name their best-selling beer. In every pub where a lager was available this was the consumer favourite and in every case sold out before I got there. So was the next best seller – usually a version of a light ale. Not a very scientific survey, I know, but let's face it, this has been a lager-drinking country for a very long time.

#### SUMMARY

Drinkability of beer is defined differently by the macro-domestic industry and the micro-craft industry. The evolution of products to meet these definitions has caused both industries to move to the opposite extremes of beer character. The notable success of light beers has pushed the macro-domestic brewing industry to make ever-lighter products

that now epitomise the extreme of beer non-beeriness. Similarly, the success of heavy beers and the pull of unusual brewing raw materials and techniques is driving the US craft brewing industry to an extreme of rare, unique and even peculiar beers. This leaves a lacuna in the middle of the product range

that is currently addressed by only a few breweries, but with success. Craft brewers have re-invented traditional ales. The author suggests that, similarly, the craft industry should bring to bear the exceptional talent of its brewers to re-invent lager beers to address this lacuna. ▯



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