

The Future of Industrial Brewing

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Warning! This column is deliberately provocative and the points made in it have been taken to the limit in order to fuel a debate.

In a fairly recent issue of the *Brewer's Guardian* (Volume 138, Number 8, September 2009), I read a very interesting interview by Editor Larry Nelson with Heineken CEO Jean-Francois van Boxmeer. In the interview, the Heineken boss lifts the veil for some very innovative perspectives of Heineken's research and development in the field of a true, continuous brewhouse technology that Heineken has patented and taken into use both in Italy and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Quoting van Boxmeer himself: 'It looks like a cracking plant, it has columns because it is a prop flow-process, the enzymatic breakdown goes through the whole flow in a few hours and then it goes out. And then it's pumped, it goes through separators and then it goes to continuous fermentation in the same way. You have a continuous beer flow that goes through the fermentation tanks while the yeast is immobilised and that's how you do your fermentation in a much more condensed time.'

Elsewhere in the interview, these types of novel technologies are mentioned in conjunction with the concept of 'platform brewing': The principle of producing one 'base beer' and then, by means of HGB and downstream addition of extracts, producing any range of different beers at the point of packaging.

And at the very end of the interview, Mr. Van Boxmeer, while firmly rejecting any outsourcing of

Heineken's laboratory services and quality control, underlines his philosophy on assuring the quality of Heineken beers: '... There are a few things where I'm a bit dogmatic: this is how you produce Heineken, the quality control, some of those things'.

Sorry, Mr. Van Boxmeer, I may be a bit stupid or slow, but I can't make those two statements match: You are proud that your company has been able to make your brewery look like a petroleum refinery, and at the same time you claim that the Heineken brewing process is sacred and unchangeable?

No doubt that production costs in brewing are and will continue to be a key focus point for the world's mega-brewers and that it, thus, makes sense to explore all novel and non-traditional technologies that achieve a given product quality at the lowest possible price. And no doubt that it is essential, through marketing and advertising, to position your products as unique and produced according to the highest quality standards. This has to be top-of-mind with the 'global consumer', who has a hard time tasting the difference between the multitude of international premium lagers offered in any given price segment. The question is, in my view, how far the actual brewing process can distance itself from the claims made by the marketers without the consumers noticing it? Can modern, industrial brewing be turned into pure commodity production and the products still sold as carefully crafted, traditional beers?

I am not saying that 'petroleum-refinery-external-enzyme-facilitated-platform-high gravity-brewed beers' are bad, nor that it is an unethical way to brew them. All I'm asking is: can you still sell them as something entirely different? And can we still, as the globally united community of beer professionals and beer lovers, in honesty tell our consumers that brewing is fundamentally the same whether it happens in a mega-brewery or in a home-built and hand-operated nano brewery? Unlike the petroleum, pharmaceutical, detergent or dairy industries, ours is one where we cannot ignore this question. ☺

