

Joining in the Craft Beer Debate!

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It appears that barely a day goes by when I don't get someone in my shop (Favourite Beers in Cheltenham) asking about where I stand on craft beer, generally followed up with questions like "So what is craft beer anyway?" or "as a member of CAMRA, surely you can't support craft beer?"

As such, I thought that I should put pen to paper (actually pressing a few keys on my computer, but 'pen to paper' sounds far more romantic) and express some of my own views on the subject.

So is there a definition for Craft Beer?

Firstly on the subject of 'What is craft beer?' – For the UK there isn't any sort of official definition; and personally I don't think it is possible to actually group a particular set of UK breweries, or beers into a collective whole and say with any certainty that these are craft beers and any other beers and breweries not listed are not craft. Furthermore, as I explain below, I don't really think that there is a need to do so (although I have had a few 'shouty' people argue with me on this point!).



In the USA, the Brewers Association does have a definition of what a US Craft Brewer is and this has three clauses:

An American craft brewer is 'small', 'independent' and 'traditional'.

The first of these clauses states that 'small' means brewing less than 6 million barrels of beer a year – Six Million! That's an awfully big brewery in my book (a UK micro-brewery sitting below the 50HL band for full relief under the progressive beer duty would produce a maximum equivalent of 4300 US barrels). It is also notable that the original US definition of small was 2 million barrels until it was realised that the Boston Beer Company (Sam Adams) produced 2.3 million barrels and so the bar was raised to accommodate one of the founding fathers of their craft beer revolution!

The second clause – Independent isn't truly independent, as it allows a brewery to be 25% owned by another bigger 'Non-Craft' brewery, this can have a massive influence on the brewery. The definition for last clause, 'traditional' is pretty vague as well, as it states that the brewer must have "a majority of its total beverage alcohol volume in beers whose flavor derives from traditional or innovative brewing ingredients and their fermentation." – sounds like a definition decided by a committee that allows anyone to do pretty much whatever they want!

Now, it has been generally accepted that the US definition does have an awful lot of holes in it and would not really be of any use for adopting in the UK. There have been proposals put forward in this country for a similar set of clauses – most notably the one from the Brewdog founders last year, but these all seem to be trying to nail down something that seems to be increasingly indefinable. We also need to question the motives of the people who are putting forward these suggestions – I couldn't fail to notice that on the issue of size, the Brewdog proposal suggested a maximum annual capacity of 500,000HL – which just happens to be identical to the maximum expansion capacity of their new brewery!

It is also very notable that a lot of people (and I include brewers and bar owners here) do seem to just be using the 'Craft' label so that they can charge ridiculous prices for beers that are essentially still just made with water, malted barley, hops and yeast!

So anyway, in the UK at the moment there really is not any definition for what Craft beer is.

So, if it isn't defined, why is everyone talking about it?



The reason we are hearing a lot about Craft Beer in the UK at the moment is that it is currently very fashionable particularly with a relatively new generation of young, 'hipster' beer drinkers.

It all started with a few of the more ambitious early micro-breweries (Thornbridge - 2005, Brewdog - 2007, the Kernel - 2009 etc.) experimenting with the more obvious styles coming out of the craft breweries in the US. They started to make use of the big alpha acid American hops to create American style IPAs and Pale Ales full of tropical fruit and pine flavours. These provided a taste sensation that the UK beer drinker hadn't really experienced and the beers proved to be very popular (I can still remember the buzz at the Cotswold Beer Festival when Thornbridge Jaipur first made its debut there). Over the past five years we have seen an ever-increasing number of micro-breweries emulate these early innovators.

1 - Thornbridge - UK Craft beer pioneers?

The draught versions of these early UK 'Craft' beers were originally produced exclusively in cask form and were welcomed by CAMRA members up and down the country. Increasingly however, over the past few years many of these breweries have been moving over to keg dispense methods or a mix of the two. This has allowed their beers to be showcased in more bars where perhaps traditional cask dispense is difficult or impossible and has introduced some great beers to a new, generally younger generation of beer drinkers. It is also worth pointing out that these keg products are far removed from those of the early 70's that prompted the formation of CAMRA in the first place.

So when you hear people talk about the UK 'Craft Beer' scene at the moment, the majority tend to be referring to big hoppy beers, brewed using US or South Pacific hops and being served in trendy bars by keg dispense methods or in 330ml bottles and cans. This is a bit ingenuous, as many of the better new 'craft' breweries are producing a whole range of innovative styles of beer ranging from unusual experiments with strange flavouring additions (adjuncts) or barrel aging to those who are recreating new versions of classic European beer styles with a unique UK twist. Many of these are being 'packaged' in cask, keg and bottle form so that the drinker has a choice of which to try.



There are however also a whole range of new small breweries that are producing exceptionally good traditional beers, including good old 'boring brown beer', but should these be called craft?

Craft or Artisanal

So, OK, what does 'Craft' mean to me and the beers I stock in my shop?

Using the above vague definitions of 'Craft Beer', I could probably only classify about 25% of my stock in that category. The problem is there are many grey areas and overlaps – where do German and Belgian beers fit in? Do bottle conditioned beers fit in craft or not? what about those breweries who are deliberately producing 'Craft' ranges to differentiate their other beers? – it is a total minefield and in my opinion a source of needless argument and debate.

Surely what beer drinkers are really after are good quality, tasty beers at a reasonable price? In my view there are a number of breweries currently hoisting the 'craft' flag whilst making very unexceptional or even faulty beers (I call this 'band-wagon jumping'!) yet there are some stunning beers coming out from small micros who would not dream of classifying their beers in the craft bucket.

I am quite picky in selecting the majority of bottled beers that I stock, but rather than class them as 'Craft', I prefer to use the term 'Artisanal'.

My own definition for 'Artisanal' beers is that they come from breweries and brewers who have a hands-on approach to the brewing process (e.g. those who experience the joy of cleaning out the mash tun) and who exhibit qualities such as integrity, passion and honesty. They will concentrate on producing beers of consistent high quality and will not be driven by accountants to use low quality ingredients just to improve the bottom line. They will innovate when necessary, but they will also reserve the right not to use flavour adjuncts or barrel ageing in order to look cool. They will ultimately be people who care about and indeed are passionate about the beers they produce.



2 - Cans are in vogue with the craft beer movement

Using this definition I would happily classify over 98% of the bottled beers that I currently stock as Artisanal. Many of these are bottle conditioned so will appeal to the CAMRA purists, but as long as they are not heavily pasteurised, filtered beers can be just as full of flavour.

One of the arguments that Brewdog put forward last year for having a UK craft beer definition was that shops and supermarkets should create 'Craft' sections on their shelves to help the modern brewers get more awareness for their products – I really don't agree with this, it suggests that my customers are not intelligent enough to figure out for themselves what beers are good and what they would like to spend their hard earned cash on.



3- Quality Artisanal Beers

At the end of the day this is what it comes down to – the discerning beer drinkers will vote with their taste buds and wallets and don't need to be guided towards beers by some artificial definition. Don't get me wrong, the whole craft beer debate/scene in the last few years has been a brilliant vehicle for getting more and younger people interested in drinking some great beers and moving them away from bland mass-produced lagers and alcopops. Hopefully they will carry on experimenting with new beers and flavours long after the latest craft craze has died down – we just need to get them to join CAMRA as well now.