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CHOW

Beyond the ale

Craft brewers move past the stigma of lager yeasts



In the craft beer world, tastes are changing, at least in one major way. IPAs of various renditions

by
Alastair Bland

continue to draw the most demand and attention, but at breweries around the nation, craft brewers are trying their hands at making lagers. This is not news, but the extent to which it is happening is remarkable.

Just a decade ago, a couple of the handful of lagers readily available among craft brewers were Sierra Nevada's Summerfest (a Czech pilsner-style lager) and Sam Adams' flagship Boston Lager.

Most lagers have a distinct flavor profile—and one that craft beer enthusiasts tended to revile for decades. They have a bready, rice-and-biscuit flavor that I used to associate with dirty movie theaters and ballpark bleacher seats. To me, that smell and taste were the trademark sensory cues of Big Beer—of Bud, Coors, Corona, Miller and other such large-scale brewers.

As breweries reemerged from the ashes of Prohibition around the World War II era, they primarily brewed lagers. Lagers owe themselves to a distinct species of yeast, *Saccharomyces pastorianus*, which ferments at low temperatures and

over a long period of time. In the decades that followed, the general public began to associate beer with lagers. The two were essentially synonymous.

When craft brewers began to appear en force in 1980s and 1990s, they focused on ales—basically the technical counterpart to lagers, brewed with a different species of yeast, *S. cerevisiae*, which works rapidly at higher temperatures and produces a different profile of flavors, often heavy and malty.

The result was two separate beer cultures with their own signature flavors and styles. As a general rule, giant breweries did not make ales, and craft brewers did not make lagers. Moreover, for craft beer drinkers, the lager has long been the enemy—a weak and watery symbol of everything craft brewers stood against, including monotony, monopolies, corporate interests, and cost-cutting as a business ethos.

A few years ago, craft brewers everywhere began to step over this line, and in the past five years we have seen an explosion in the number of European- and Mexican-style pilsners and other lagers flowing from America's craft brewpub tap handles.

One might say that Big Beer had stolen the lager and that craft brewers are now stealing it back.

If you haven't tried a craft lager yet, the important thing to remember is that even though many of these new beers won't taste exactly like the major lager brands, they will be familiar. That isn't meant to be a knock on the style; it's just true. Lagers have a classic flavor profile, and Big Beer companies generally have done a good job of consistently replicating it. Now, craft brewers are embracing it, and as more and more small breweries make lagers, it's likely that the negative feelings many people harbor toward these beers will dissipate.

Several weeks ago, at a small family dinner gathering, I was faced with two beer choices: an IPA from 21st Amendment Brewery and Sufferfest Beer Co.'s Flyby, a German-style pilsner. I went with the pilsner. Not only did I enjoy the beer, but I recognized in the moment that this beer did not taste like Bud or Heineken or Stella Artois, or some other mainstream lager. That is just an association we have been trained to make. Rather, the Flyby tasted like a fine example of a pilsner.

For those of us still getting used to craft lagers, it's time we leave our stigmas at the door. □

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