

THE REAL THING

Words Jen Marsden

WITH BEER LONG HERALDED AS THE WORKING MAN'S WINE, THE LOYAL PINT HAS ENJOYED A FAR RICHER CULTURAL HISTORY THAN MEETS THE EYE. TODAY, THERE'S PLENTY HAPPENING TO ENSURE THAT THE INDUSTRY REMAINS TRUE TO ITS PRE-INDUSTRIAL ROOTS ...

It is thought that ale originated over 6,000 years ago, when ancient Mesopotamians began to store their 'liquid bread' through the winter. By the Middle Ages every chap and his dog were happily embracing a breakfast brew. Packed full of vitamin B and phytochemicals, it's now been verified that, just like the old adage of an apple, a snifter a day lowers heart disease by 25%, so we all have an excuse for our liquid love.

CONTINUALLY GROWING DESPITE THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC DOWNTURN, THE BEER trade today is worth a whopping US\$448.6bn. Connoisseurs from all classes travel long distances every year to celebrate its harvested existence at occasions such as Oktoberfest in Germany and the Great American Beer Festival. Thanks to the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA), established when its four founders grew tired of the 'too fizzy, no character, no taste' state of the monopolised beer world, palatable choices – from fair trade speciality beers to organic ales – abound in our local pubs. CAMRA, with its emphasis on real, traditional ingredients of malted barley, hops, water and yeast matured by secondary fermentation (gloriously dubbed cask-conditioned ale), is deemed one of the most successful consumer groups in Europe. Against its inferior keg-beer cousin, CAMRA have successfully supported the opening of 80 new breweries within the last year and promoted the importance of localised production. Beer drinking is an individual penchant, with over 2,500 different kinds in the UK. According to the Intelligent Choice Report in 2008, cask ale is the best-performing sector in the UK beer market.

CAMRA's emphasis on independent operations encourages crafty experimentation, such as the micro- and family-run breweries that beer had its heritage in prior to the industrial revolution. One example is the Black Isle Brewery in Scotland, which supplies cold filtered beers to a national market. Black Isle Brewery offers the distillation of a wholesome sustainable slurp with its recycled bottling and ingredients that are grown free of pesticides and organically certified. This is in contrast to the conventional farmer, who is estimated to



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spray hops up to 14 times each year with an average of 15 different pesticides. Cornell University research indicates that 67m birds die each year from pesticides sprayed on US fields. It has also been suggested that organically certified alcohol minimises the hangover risk due to the reduced sulphite levels during production.

Organic beer is celebrated by the merry jamboree of the annual North American Organic Brewers Festival (NAOBF), a rich mix of beer lovers and environmentalists. Brewers were once limited in the styles which they could produce organically. When the NAOBF was first held in 2003, the idea of sustainability was just emerging in the brewing industry, with organic hops and malt in very limited supply. At last year's event there were organic beers from crisp German pilsners to chocolatey porters, spicy Belgian-style wit beers and saisons, to hoppy India pale ales, sweet amber ales and even rich barley wines. Sustainable developments in the brewing industry go well beyond using organic ingredients. One Californian brewery has even installed hydrogen fuel cells, and a brewery in Colorado recycles its waste water to generate methane used to fire a generator.

ANOTHER CONSIDERATION BEING GUZZLED UP is that of fair trade, whereby the UK's Fairtrade Foundation, Max Havelaar or Transfair USA ensure that products have transparent, certified ingredients in them. Paid a fair, stable wage, sugar, coconut and even mango producers can then choose how to invest the premium into local community development.

Fair-trade beer companies like Mongozo are considering organic certification and some, such as those produced by UK-based Freeminer's microbrewery, already tick all the proverbial boxes of being organic, fair trade, vegetarian and vegan. Freeminer's microbrewery are even befriending the mass pub chain with their fair-trade message by going into partnership with one of the UK's major pub retailers, Wetherspoon. With progress like this, the environment, local producers, the working man and the beer aficionado alike will all benefit. What better reason to raise your glass to the future? ■