

Everything In Its Right Place

Or, lost styles and crappy BJCP categories ... by Greg Hackenberg

I've got Viktor Krauss's (Allison's brother) *Far from Enough* playing and I'm thinking of delving into a lost beer style this time around as it fits the "soundtrack in search of a movie" quality this album has. Call this a beer in search of a style. This is a beer that had/has a very long and storied history and definitely should not have been lost. "Lost" may not be the best term...let's call it "mislaidd". This was one of the cornerstones of London brewing in the 19th and early 20th century. Following WWII its popularity receded like the Louisiana coastline and nearly vanished, but it did survive.

Now, if you happen to ask any good brewer during Victoria's, Edward's or George IV's reign, "what are the principal beers brewed these days" the response would be "Why, Porter, Pale Ale, Mild and Burton!" While the first three in their post WWI and WWII incarnations managed to survive to be sanctified and defined in the BJCP, good luck finding Burton Ale mentioned in there. Wither Burton Ale; by the time the beer writers and style boys came of age, the taste for bitter and lager had reduced the available examples of this wonderful beer to a seasonal brew that weren't even called "Burton" anymore.

And why would the once so important Burton Ale style not be covered? Well, evidently Michael Jackson never wrote about it, so therefore it doesn't exist. Well, he sort of did, he just got it wrong. What happened was Mr. Jackson saw the designation BPA in some old brewing literature and thought it meant "Best Pale Ale" but he was wrong. Can you guess what it is? I hope so. It's Burton Pale Ale which is decidedly NOT what stylistically we would think of as a Pale Ale. Mr. Jackson has since "gone for a Burton" so we'll leave him in peace. Which is a great expression; it's believed to have originated in the Battle of Britain for a pilot who had come out on the wrong end of a dogfight, much nicer than "won't be here for tea because plowed up an acre of sod with the burning hulk of his aircraft. Oh, say, they found his watch."...but I digress.

The beer writers and style boys that followed just assumed he was right, and you know what happens when you assume? Stuff like this; forcing the facts to fit the theory. Burton Ale was often mentioned alongside Pale Ale in old advertising, and since we know there was no such thing as Burton Ale they erroneously assumed it to be a kind of IPA. You know, because Burton-on-Trent and IPA and all that. Or a Burton-on-Trent brewed Pale Ale, you know, Bass orange triangle and whatnot. Actually, Bass Ale No.1 was their Burton Ale and it is the stuff of legend. It was first simply called a strong ale and featured an orange diamond on the label.

Okay, so what is Burton Ale? In short it is a darkish, somewhat sweet beer, first brewed by the great breweries of Burton-on-Trent for export to the Russian market before the inevitable wars, politics and tariffs cut off their trade and in the 1820's and compelled them to start brewing heavily hopped Porter and a bit of pale stock ale for the East India market that has come down to us as IPA. Those of you getting your dander up about that bit about that Porter and IPA bit, keep you powder dry, I will explain that one another time. But remember that "stock ale" bit. It will play a part later.

What's in it? As most British beer, we start with a good base of pale malt but with darker crystal malts, invert brewing sugar for additional fermentable, and a dark, molasses like invert sugar for extra color and flavor. What you end up with should be a dark, fruity, slightly sweet and warming, possibly with some subtle molasses notes...Yum.

Now if you're not still cheesed off about IPA, you may be thinking "I've heard of beers like that" and you'd be correct. There are even a few examples left for us to enjoy...if you can find them: Young's Winter Warmer, Marston's Owd Roger and Theakston's Old Peculiar. But according to our friends, such beers are lumped into the catch-all or catch nothing category of 19A "Old Ale". And where would we be without the BJCP to tell us how we are all doing it all wrong? Well this time BJCP is wrong. They completely botched the Old Ale category. Really, it's worse than the "clone the one or two surviving commercial examples" categories.

I can say that at least when the term “Old Ale” is invoked these are the beers one thinks of, and the style description hits on all the characteristics. However the guidelines then go on to contain enough fuzzy terms, weasel words and take backs that it must have been written by an attorney specializing in car rental agreements. And brewing to it is like using a shovel to cut a steak; you’ve got a blunt and virtually useless tool for the task.

You get stellar criteria like this; “Light amber to very dark reddish-brown color (most are fairly dark).” Translated that says it can be SRM 6 or 30, but mostly 22, and then for good measure they put 10-22 in the Stats. And then, right there in the “Old Ale” comments is this actual admission that it’s a junk-drawer of a style “Fits in the style space between normal gravity beers (strong bitters, brown porters and barleywines). Can include winter warmers, strong dark milds, strong (and perhaps darker) bitters...” Um, okay. Anything else you’d like to add?

Really, trying to contain the stupid here is a tricky business. How so? Well, 19A mentions barleywine and right next door is 19B English Barleywine. Everybody knows these are the strongest beers. Well, sort of. By BJCP basically anything over a certain strength that is not too dark or an “imperial” of something else is a Barleywine, right? Well what do you do with a sweet, ruddy brown Ale, aged for years with a whopping 1.130 O.G.? That’s what the original Allsopp’s “Arctic Ale” was, and it was most definitely a Burton Ale, not a “Barleywine”. In its heyday Burton with gravities of 1.100 was common, but it came in a variety of strengths.

And when we start looking at the old adverts and marketing (they are useful for something), some of the strongest Burton Ales were actually described as “barley wine” as early as the Edwardian era. Ind. Coope produced a “Burton Barley Wine” until 1934 when they renamed it “Arctic Ale” to take advantage of the publicity of an Arctic exploration (there we go, marketing!). But “barley wine” was also used as a descriptive term for a number of other strong beers.

But here’s an even better one. That Bass Ale No.1 Burton Ale I mentioned before, in the early 20th century they changed the description and take a guess what they called it? As you can plainly see on the label, it’s Barleywine.

And now for the punchline: make the rounds of most beer writers and discuss this as if it was a modern barleywine in the school of Thomas Hardy Ale, Fuller’s Golden Pride, and so on. Like I said, Michael Jackson never wrote about it, so therefore it doesn’t exist. You want a bonus punchline? That Fuller’s Golden Pride? It’s listed as a commercial example in the Barleywine category. Fuller’s Vintage Ale shows up in the examples for Old Ale. Are you ready for this? They are **the same beer**. The only difference is Vintage Ale is bottle conditioned. Like I said, hard to contain the stupid here.

So now that I’ve thoroughly confused you, you might be asking what the heck is a barleywine? Unfortunately, this rant is running long so next month I will delve into all this a bit further, perhaps with a recipe or two, and possibly trying to find a way to make sense of this all.

