Is Carlsberg listening to its customers?

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Opinion

After I heard the news that Danish giant Carlsberg is to cull a slew of beers including Bombardier, my first thought was of the pub I worked in 25-odd years ago. It was here where I knew what 95 per cent of customers drank, and I imagine they’re still standing at the bar arguing over which is better: Pride or Bombardier. (There was a third guest pump: usually Wadworth 6X). One customer – like me, known as Dave – drank Bombardier and nothing else. If it ran out, he went home, sulking, as the other locals tried to control their giggles. Dave was a grumpy soul and even spent his time at the bar with his ex-wife and her new husband. The words “poor sod” were an understatement. And he’s not the type of person you’d imagine spearheading a campaign to save his favourite beer which he would down every night. But he would be one of the most affected by Calsberg’s decision. Instead, when the news came in, we heard from those online saying it was a tired beer, not popular and deserved to be destined for the chop. I disagree, but I decided to double-check and headed to the Pelton Arms in Greenwich, South-East London, where I discovered that the drink was still popular among the Daves of the world. This was a pub fighting to stay alive with the publican ploughing in money to keep the lights on, the fires aflame and the music playing. He told me his regulars were a 3pm crew who would sit in the same stools and drink the same drink – Bombardier, of course. It wasn’t huge numbers – they went through three casks a week – but these people kept the doors open and gave the pub a community feel. The staff named the Bombardier drinkers: Greg, Ben the Hat, Flamingo Dave, Wonky Pete... and, of course, Bombardier John. It’s easy to mock people who drink the same pint every day, but surely these are the regulars who deserve the most plaudits for being the most loyal customers and supporting pubs? And surely Carlsberg should value them more than transient lager drinkers who have faddy tastes and are susceptible to questionable marketing, such as Madri – “the soul of Madrid” but brewed in Tadcaster. The sceptics will say “they should just drink something better”, but when your whole world revolves around one pub, one seat and one drink then why should you change? And most of all: why aren’t they consulted about the decision and why are the biggest voices the ones that haven’t ever touched a drop of Bombardier? I’ll confess I actually like Bombardier. As well as having a soft finish with hints of toffee, fudge and fruity tones of raisin and sultana, it reminds me of serving Dave, stoically putting up with his lot including a wife who left him for a younger man. A local shunned to a corner of a pub, forgotten by most until his favourite drink ran out. Instead of chuckling at Dave, like the locals in that pub, Carlsberg should ask him why he shows so much loyalty when multinationals like them don’t even know the definition of the word.