Reflections on announcing CAMRA competition results

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Opinion



Announcing the results of Champion Beer of Britain competitions can be a high-risk activity. I still recall with a shiver the occasion when I told the assembled masses that Greene King IPA had won a gold award for the Bitter category and was roundly booed. “Don’t shoot the messenger,” I pleaded. I hadn’t judged that particular category and was just reporting the results. To no avail: I was still viewed as the Devil’s Advocate. I was back on the mic at the Great British Beer Festival Winter in Rotherham and, following a quick check with the great and the good, said we thought Cairngorm, with Black Gold (4.4 per cent), marked the first time a Scottish brewery had won the top award in the winter competition. No boos this time, just warm applause – not for me but for the brewery in Aviemore. But we were wrong. Christine Cryne, who was in charge of the beer judging and is a stickler for accuracy, told me the next day she had done some research and found that Orkney brewery had won the winter festival back in 2001 with its strong ale Skull Splitter. Mea culpa. I should have remembered, as I had once again announced the results and read out the citation to Orkney. Again, no boos just cheers and applause. But then the heavens opened, and controversy reigned with the Portman Group weighing in and criticising the result. Portman is a think tank set up by the brewing industry to encourage sensible drinking and to oversee the way in which beer is sold and marketed. It comes down heavily on any brewery that produces a beer with a provocative name emphasising strength that discourages moderate consumption. It said the name Skull Splitter suggested the beer, at 8.5 per cent, would create hangovers and headaches and undermined Portman’s efforts to promote sensible drinking. Orkney’s response was swift, decisive and rebuked Portman for its ignorance of Scottish history. It said Skull Splitter was the nickname of Thorfinn Einarson, the 7th Viking Earl of the Orkneys. Skull Splitter was his nickname and marked the no-nonsense manner in which he wielded his axe to see off his enemies. The Portman Group retreated, tail between its collective legs, and Skull Splitter has continued to be brewed for the pleasure of Scots and any Vikings still left in the islands. In the early days of the Great British Beer Festival, Terry Jones of Monty Python fame opened one festival held at Alexandra Palace in London by pouring two pints of beer over his head. I should have taken that as my cue. Years later, if I’d poured Greene King IPA over my bonce, I would have been cheered rather than booed. In Rotherham, I kept my sample of Cairngorm Black Gold in the glass. It’s too good to use as shampoo.