Robust stout revival

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Opinion

When Cairngorm brewery stormed to victory with its Black Gold in CAMRA’s Champion Winter Beer of Britain competition it was further evidence of the astonishing revival of stout and porter. And the award also shone a light on a style that was once a major seller in Britain – namely milk stout. Cairngorm doesn’t call Black Gold a milk stout, but it uses lactose as a key ingredient – the hallmark of the style. Lactose is also known as milk sugar, which is found in such dairy food as cheese. It can’t be fermented by brewer’s yeast and, as it contains carbohydrates and calories, it adds a smooth and slightly sweet flavour to beer. Until the late 1960s, the best-known milk stout was Mackeson, which was first brewed in 1909 by a brewery in Hythe in Kent. It became so popular that the national brewer Whitbread bought it in 1929, and by the 1950s it accounted for half of the brewery’s annual output. It was promoted on television by the actor Bernard Miles with the slogan “It looks good, it tastes good and by golly it does you good”. Miles needed the income from the ads to help him found the Mermaid Theatre at Blackfriars in the 1960s, the first new London theatre since the 17th century. Whitbread lost interest in Mackeson when in 1968 it won the contract to brew a version of Heineken lager for the British market. As more Brits started to take holidays abroad, where they acquired a taste for lager, Whitbread was anxious to jump on this new, fast-moving and lucrative beery bandwagon. In 2000, Whitbread quit brewing and sold its brands to an international group that became AB InBev, and which now accounts for 30 per cent of all the beer brewed worldwide. It does nothing to promote Mackeson, which has become a beer on wheels. It’s been brewed by Young’s, Vaux, Cameron’s and Hydes and is currently at Brain’s in Cardiff. It’s a shocking way to treat a beer that once vied in sales and popularity with Guinness. Its modest strength of 3 per cent ABV has been lowered to 2.8 per cent to save on excise duty. Other brewers have more belief in the style and produce their versions of milk stout with passion and in cask-conditioned form. The Bristol Beer Factory’s Milk Stout, 4.5 per cent, won the porter and stout class in the Champion Winter Beer of Britain competition in 2009 and has won awards in a series of other competitions. It’s based in a city that was once famous for the number of breweries that used the port to export stout to Ireland and further afield in the 18th and 19th centuries. The biggest of the breweries was George’s. It became part of the national group Courage, which closed the Bristol plant in 1999. The Beer Factory has revived the city’s stout tradition with a beer that has lactose added in powder form during the boil with hops. The beer is brewed with Maris Otter pale malt, crystal and chocolate malts, and roast barley. The hops are Challenger and Fuggles. It’s available in cask and bottle-conditioned form and has a rich and inviting aroma of creamy malt, roasted grain and dark fruits with a gentle underpinning of spicy hops. Creamy and slightly sweet malt builds on the palate but it’s well balanced by hops, burnt fruit and chocolate. The finish is complex, creamy malt vying for attention with fruit, chocolate and hops. The brewing world was stunned in 2018 when a dark stout won the Champion Beer of Britain award at the Great British Beer Festival in August, at a time when pale beers such as IPA were all the rage. But Siren Craft Brew’s Broken Dream Breakfast Stout is no ordinary dark beer. At 6.5 per cent, it puts most other stouts and porters in the shade, and while the use of lactose means it’s in the milk stout category, it makes Mackeson at 2.8 per cent look like a featherweight among the big hitters. The Berkshire brewery, founded in 2013, is meticulous about its choice of raw materials. Broken Dream uses eight malts, including pale, chocolate and a special smoked grain imported from the famous malting town of Bamberg in Bavaria, southern Germany. The single hop also comes from Bavaria. The Magnum variety from the world-famous Hallertau region near Munich gives a robust fruity and bitter note to the beer. As well as lactose, Siren uses coffee roasted for the brewery by a speciality Berkshire coffee company. The beer has a massive hit of dark and roasted grains with rich notes of chocolate, smoke, caramel and coffee. Coffee and sweet malts dominate the palate but with a fine balance of fruity and spicy hops and continuing notes of chocolate and caramel. The finish is long and bittersweet, with creamy and roasted malts, fruity hops, chocolate and coffee. Strong stout for breakfast? As I drink far too much coffee, it could be a healthier way to start the day.