Missed opportunity

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Opinion

Heineken returning its cherished Beamish Irish stout to British pubs is unlikely to come as a surprise to anyone not living under a rock at the moment. Murphy’s, the other nitro Irish stout within the Dutch brewing giant’s stable of brands has seen a surge in popularity over the last few months, with on-trade sales reportedly growing by 632 per cent since its reintroduction to the UK market last year. Executives will no doubt be expecting Beamish to follow in its impressive wake. The re-emergence of these brands within the UK is down to – again unsurprisingly – the near-totalitarian dominance of Guinness. From the Six Nations to the Premier League, to the Instagram accounts of scores of Gen-Z influencers, the world's most popular stout is seemingly everywhere at the moment. Perhaps what’s most remarkable about Guinness is the sheer longevity of its popularity and influence. In the 1970s it was snapping at the heels of the likes of Whitbread, Bass and Ind Coope. Now those brands are consigned to history, while Guinness – which has been under the stewardship of parent company Diageo since 1997 – remains, unperturbed. Despite how unshakable the stout’s market position has seemed, it turns out not even the almighty Guinness is infallible. As recently as winter 2024 there was panic as supplies of the beloved stout began to run dry, with rumours about the reasons behind the shortage spreading like wildfire. Some wrote them off as just that, rumours. Especially as supply to pubs in Manchester and London was maintained, surely so that certain aforementioned influencers weren’t robbed of opportunities to Split the G. But it turns out the shortage was very much real, and depending on who you believe it’s due to everything from a simple lack of kegs to meet demand, to a brewery vessel imploding at St James Gate brewery in Dublin, where Guinness is produced. This lapse in supply, coupled with a significant rise in the cost price of Guinness, presented rival operator Heineken with the perfect opportunity to roll out its own stout brands, with results that, on paper, look remarkable. The truth is that Heineken has the scales tipped massively in its favour when it comes to access to market. With demand for nitro Irish stouts evidently at a peak, it makes sense that it would use the depth of these resources to promote this “growth”. Through its sister company, Star Pubs and Bars, which operates around 2,700 pubs in the UK, it has been able to secure tap listings for draught Murphy’s – and now Beamish – with ease. It also has contracted listings within several other pubcos and has been able to offer Murphy’s as a lower-priced alternative to Guinness. For strapped-for-cash pub licensees, making the switch to this rather than an alternative from a British independent has been something of a no-brainer. And there is a plethora of alternatives, with every brewery and its dog jumping on the nitro-stout bandwagon. London-based Anspach & Hobday’s London Black is one popular option, with Extra Stout from Edinburgh’s Campervan being another. It’s a challenge for these smaller brands, though, as not only is it a struggle to match the prices of their multinational competitors, but due to pubco ties, there simply isn’t the same access to market available to them. They’re not even playing at the same table, let alone with the same deck of cards. More than this, however, the sudden rise in popularity of stout feels like a missed opportunity. If younger, more aspirational drinkers are choosing a dark, malty beverage, served via nitrogen dispense that’s been popular since the 1970s, then why isn’t another, far more culturally important British beer institution taking advantage of this? I am, of course, talking about cask beer, and I feel like there has never been a better moment over the past 20 years to get more people into cask. So why aren’t breweries, indeed, CAMRA itself, taking advantage of this? In one of my favourite Manchester pubs, the Salisbury on Oxford Road, I will always order Theakston’s Old Peculier. The staff keep it masterfully here and serve it with the care and reverence such a beer deserves. On ordering a pint, the server will take a sparkling clean glass, place the swan-necked spout to its base, and pull beer through vigorously to create a surge of tan-hued foam. When the glass is about three-quarters full, they stop, resting the settling beer on the bar before beginning to pour the next glass, and so on. There’s an art to it, the patience, watching the slow surge of perfectly conditioned real ale settle to form a tight, creamy head. After a minute or so the swan neck is returned to the base of the glass, the beer topped off, with the loosely knit foam at the top of the beer tipped away so that the remaining, finger-thick head is consistent in its density. It’s then presented on the bar in a branded glass, looking perfectly picturesque, cellar cool, with plenty of life and sparkle, tasting sublime. It reminds me of another beer mentioned in this article, but it is not considered with the same reverence as the one brewed in Dublin, or those brewed elsewhere in Ireland that have come for its crown. While multinational stout brands battle for space on the keg taps, it’s the perfect time for cask beer to make its mark where they cannot compete.