Price of reality

21/06/2025 by Matthew Curtis

Opinion

I have a rule when I see Thornbridge Jaipur on cask: I always order it. At 5.9 per cent it might not always be the most sensible decision, but it is definitely the correct one. Except, while enjoying a pint at my local, Heaton Hops in Stockport, landlord Damian O’Shea delivered me some bad news. “This might be the last time I stock it, I’ve had some complaints about the price,” he said. This left me flabbergasted. I understand this comes from a position of privilege, but I hadn’t even considered how much it cost when I ordered it. In fact all I remember is that I paid somewhere between four and five pounds for my pint, and it felt very reasonable for the 20 or 30 minutes of quiet joy it provided me with. But just down the road, in a Wetherspoon, the same beer, being served in fantastic condition, was being sold for just £2.29. The beer is part of the chain’s summer sale offering and is being sold for between that and £2.69 depending on whereabouts in the country it is made available. Before we get too deep into it, I should express that my views on Wetherspoon and how it operates have evolved over the years. Between 10 or 15 years ago I was very snobby about it, now I consider it holds an important place within Britain’s pub ecosystem. Everyone, regardless of income status, should have the opportunity to go and enjoy a bit of time in a pub. The extreme rises in the cost-of-living has made the majority of pubs inaccessible to people with low incomes, and Wetherspoons provide that space, and does it well. You might not get the same experience in the Wetherspoon as you do, say, a favourite pub of yours, but you get a pub experience, and that’s what matters. And, for what it’s worth, I try to separate the views of the chain’s outspoken owner, Tim Martin, from the pubs themselves. Jaipur is one of the best beers being brewed in the country right now. Developed by brewers Martin Dickie and Stefano Cossi in 2005, this year it is celebrating its 20th year in production. Now under the stewardship of head brewer Rob Lovatt and current British Guild of Beer Writers Brewer of the Year Dominic Driscoll, Jaipur is precise in its delivery of flavour and satisfaction to the point where few beers can match it. To have it accessible to many at a low price is a good thing. But having it available so widely and for such a low price means Thornbridge is walking something of a tightrope – once you lower the price of something, so too do you lower the expectations of that cost, and indeed the inherent value of the very thing you are selling. Yorkshire’s Timothy Taylor has been vocal in the past on how it has refused to lower its prices to meet Wetherspoon’s expectations, and even has its letter of response framed on its boardroom wall. As demonstrated by the proprietor of my own local, Jaipur has reframed its own customers’ perception of said price. Does this mean Jaipur is no longer able to command the premium many would consider it deserves? There’s also another question, the one of the beer’s strength versus its price. In recent weeks the anti-alcohol lobby has been mustering, leading the Guardian to publish a detailed editorial about its views on alcohol consumption, stating that “alcohol-related deaths in the UK reached a record high of 10,473 in 2023, with men more than twice as likely to die as women.” Despite more people drinking at home than in the pub, and people also consuming other alcoholic beverages such as wine, cider and spirits, the publication very specifically chose a photograph of pints in the pub to illustrate its feature. The pale, yellow beer on display could very well be my own, beloved Jaipur. In a recent feature for The Drinks Business my writing peer David Jesudason astutely pointed out that a 25ml measure of Bell’s whisky (40 per cent alcohol) is available for just £1.69. Beer, however, does not have nearly the same clout as either the whisky or wine industries. If it is to offer a strong version of itself at hugely discounted prices, then it must be careful not to fall foul of the trap set by those who desire more stringent regulations. Me? I’ll be sad to see Jaipur stop appearing at my own local if indeed that does come to pass, but I’ll cope, because other beers are available. If its success as a national brand means a brewery of Thornbridge’s high calibre remains sustainable as a business, then that’s a positive. But it does beg a question of those who desire cask beer to become a premium product, because it will forever struggle if a beer as good as this can be sold for less than half the price it is being sold for elsewhere.