What beer can learn from Batham's

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Opinion

It was a mid-week lunchtime and I had travelled 150 miles, traversing city, town and country to reach my destination. But, boy, was this a destination worth the schlep: cobs the size of Tango footballs, sparkled pints with cumulus cloud-like heads and a hubbub usually heard in a bustling high-street pub. Known locally as the Bull and Bladder, the Vine is one of a dozen Batham's pubs dotted around the Black Country and where Alice Batham, the brewery’s first female head brewer, tends to the open fermentation tanks. It was a privilege to see her at work but also an honour to see a family mini-pub chain thriving in difficult trading conditions. For a few hours I was welcomed into its lovely community and was taken behind the scenes viewing the old photos, recipes and mementos. Bathamcana if you like. Therefore, it came as no surprise to learn that Bathams' revenue and profits actually increased substantially in 2024 (pre-tax profit up to £2.2m from £1.67m the previous year) and the lesson the whole beer industry can learn from this is as easy to swallow as a pint of Batham's Mild. Do a few things but do them well. While many traditional breweries with excellent core ales are looking (very belatedly) to brew craft IPAs and lagers to muscle in on a diminishing market share, Batham's pubs pour Best, Mild and a seasonal Christmas ale called XXX. That’s it, but that’s not quite it. As others ponder the fate of cask, here’s a great example of how dispensing two core beers well (from kilderkins at a reasonable price) to a loyal fanbase frequenting beautiful pubs is all that’s needed. But, because of Alice’s influence, Batham's can offer a key selling point that other breweries and pubs fail at: inclusivity. It’s not solely because she’s a she, it’s how she – and her sister, Claire, who runs the pubs – are a visible day-to-day presence listening to their customers who have drunk the same beer for years. It was Alice’s grandad who devised the recipe for the bitter and she acts as custodian of it ensuring that each pint is an advert for how much Batham’s cares about the cask experience. In fact, when I visited a year ago, Alice was saying that some of the older customers were only starting to return to the pubs after Covid. I think the figures show that they’ve not only come back in droves but others have joined them realising that something really special is on their doorstep. Now compare that with other much larger breweries which often patronise cask drinkers as they chase other markets. Perhaps patronise, though, is the key word here because these are the drinkers that regularly patronise our pubs. And they could keep doing so if more and more pubs and breweries acted like Batham's.