Mild’s stronger than you think

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Opinion

On my first trip to the Beacon Hotel in Sedgley I found a visitor from Japan in one of the small rooms supplied by the central bar. When I asked him what had brought him to a pub in the English Black Country he held up his glass and said: “Sarah Hughes Dark Ruby Mild.” That’s fame for you. A beer brewed on a tiny plant at the back of a pub that has achieved recognition in Asia. I recalled that meeting last month when Sarah Hughes won Silver in the Champion Beer of Britain competition with its Snowflake Barley Wine. It’s a deserved award but the pub and brewery will always be best known for its Dark Ruby that at 6 per cent ABV has changed our perceptions of how mild ale should taste. Most modern interpretations of mild clock in at around 3.5 per cent or less. But historically that was not the case. In 1871, in Herbert’s Art of Brewing the typical gravity of mild was 1070 degrees, which is around 7 per cent alcohol in modern measurement. At the turn of the 20th century the average strength of beer was 5.5 per cent at a time when mild was the dominant style. Back then the term mild was used to describe a beer that was not weak but which was sweeter than such other dark beers as porter and stout. They were aged in wood for lengthy periods and had a sour and lactic bite. Mild on the other hand was not aged and often had an addition of brewing sugar and caramel. The end result was a beer that satisfied large numbers of people engaged in heavy industry or agriculture and who needed to restore lost energy after long shifts in factories and fields. The Beacon Hotel was built in 1850 and it included its own small tower brewery in the yard at the back of the pub. Tower indicates that the brewing process flows from floor to floor, with water tanks at the top feeding mash tuns and coppers below. Sarah Hughes bought the hotel in 1921 and ran it for 30 years. She passed it on to her son and daughters when she retired. Only one beer, the strong mild, was produced. The family closed the brewery in 1958 but Sarah’s grandson, John, reopened it in 1987. All the old wooden vessels had rotted away and John replaced them with stainless steel ones, faced with wood. He had the good fortune to discover Sarah’s recipe for mild in an old cigar box locked in a bank security vault. It’s a simple recipe: pale malt, 10 per cent crystal malt and Fuggles and Goldings hops. On my first visit, after chatting to my new friend from Japan, I clambered up to the brewery to survey the kit. When I asked the brewer which variety of barley he used he replied Maris Piper. I wondered if he was distilling vodka on the side as Maris Piper is a variety of potato. Fortunately, John Hughes was on hand to correct his brewer and state firmly the barley was good old Maris Otter. He went on to add Surprise, Pale Amber and Snowflake to his range but Ruby Mild remained far and away the most popular beer on offer at the hotel and free pubs in the region – not forgetting Japan. With Penzance Mild winning the overall championship at the Great British Beer Festival last month, it was good to see such revered and historic beer styles getting the appreciation they deserve. Barley wine all but disappeared in the 20th century but is now being brewed again by discerning brewers. It’s a style that was developed for the English aristocracy in the 18th and 19th centuries. As a result of the interminable wars with France, patriotic English nobles refused to drink French wine and got brewers to make strong ales to grace the lords’ and ladies’ dining tables. Many of the noble houses had their own small breweries where it was the butler’s task to start the mash before preparing their master’s breakfast. As a result of heavy taxation on beer in the 20th century, strong ales of 8 per cent and more were too expensive to produce. For decades the only barley wine available was Whitbread Gold Label. It’s still around, owned today by AB InBev and largely ignored by the world’s biggest brewer of Eurofizz. But it’s being brewed again by a number of brewers and I hope Snowflake’s victory will encourage more to follow the trend. The 8 per cent beer has another simple recipe: Maris Otter pale malt, a dab of crystal malt with good old Fuggles and Goldings for aroma and bitterness. It’s luscious, vinous, with honeyed malt, rich fruit and spicy hops. You can enjoy it at the Beacon Hotel, with a packet of crisps made, no doubt, from Maris Piper spuds.