

Vintage Commemorative Beer Tasting of the Centuries

By Paul Sullivan

The optimum time to drink Barleywine would be in bitter cold weather, probably with a howling wind. Maybe even a snowstorm. How about a blizzard? Well, the ASN tasting panel faced all that and more to attend a recent vintage beer tasting. In the thick of a whiteout blizzard that dumped almost a foot and a half of snow on Brooklyn, the intrepid group (some traveling from as far as New Jersey) convened at the renowned beer café Spuyten Duyvil in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

This venue was also the setting of a mammoth Russian Imperial Stout tasting reported in Ale Street News a few issues back. It consisted of Courage Imperial Stouts from the 1990's to 1930's, and ended with a stunning 1932 Courage Barclay Perkins Imperial Stout. Those beers were for the most part in great shape, and had everyone who tasted them swooning. For this event, organizers Warren Becker and Bill Coleman outdid even that remarkable tasting.

The focus of this tasting was commemorative and strong ales from England. The tradition of brewing a strong ale to commemorate special events reaches back to the 1800's. The first record of this being done was the Bass Ratcliff ale, brewed in 1869 after the birth of Richard Henry Ratcliff, the son of one of the partners. This beer's original gravity was 1.120, the highest of any strong ale of that era. Today of course, it's one of the rarest beers in the world. These days, such beers would certainly be called barleywines, although that term wasn't in use back then. Other beers were brewed to celebrate royalty visiting the brewery, or a coronation. The tasting also included a couple of Old Ales from the 1930's. Check out this impressive list:

Bass Ratcliff Ale 1869
Bass Kings Ale 1902
H&G Simonds Ltd. Coronation Ale 1911
Bass Prince Ale 1929
Worthington Strong Burton Ale 1930
Charrington's Prince's Brew 1932
Ind Coope & Allsopp Ltd. Jubilee Ale 1935
Courage Founder's Ale 1937
Fremlins Ltd. Christmas Ale 1950
Truman's No. 1 Burton Barley Wine 1950
ER Coronation Ale 1953
Bass Jubilee Strong Ale 1977
Home Brewery Jubilee Strong Ale 1977

Wadsworth Queens Ale 1977
Cameron's Harelepool Crown Ale 1978
Ansells Strong Ale – Silver Jubilee 1978
St. Austell Princess Barleywine 1979
Greene King Audit Barleywine 1980

Although complete tasting notes would be beyond the scope of this article, highlights are below. Panelists were Warren Becker, Bill Coleman, Joe Carroll (owner of Spuyten Duyvil and our host), Garrett Oliver (Brewmaster at Brooklyn Brewery), Allan Duvall (brewer at Greenpoint Brewing Works), Glenn Burnett, Alex Hall, Felice Wechsler, and this author.

Part of the thrill of this event, apart from the amazing opportunity to taste beer made several lifetimes ago, was the opportunity to examine the bottles and labels of these precious vintage beers. The older ones were beautiful heavy glass bottles in unique shapes and sizes, nearly opaque (fortunately, which protected these ancient beers from excessive light). Many were beautifully embossed (see accompanying pictures), and with great labels, some very well preserved, some clearly showing their age. They are now displayed above the bar at Spuyten Duyvil.

A constant challenge was getting the very old corks out in one piece. Joe and Garrett did a very able job of minimizing cork breakup. At a few points Garrett bravely suctioned up errant pieces of crumbling cork up with a straw so they would not fall into the bottle that Joe was uncorking. After a joke about the age of the corks he was ingesting he quipped “Just wait, I’ll probably get polio now!”

We began with a beer that was one of the oldest of the last tasting, a 1937 Courage Founders Ale. Appearance: “Dark brown, no carbonation, a little cloudy (sediment).” Aroma: “Sour, licorice, Worcestershire sauce, evident alcohol,” “vinous, cork, sherry, damp wood/earth/.” “Incredible Amontillado nose with tar, leather, prunes, plum pudding, licorice and molasses notes, like the interior of an old leather suitcase.” Taste: “Sour, chocolate cherries.” Molasses, rummy, chocolate, nutty, dry tar finish.” Drinkability: “Very drinkable, pleasing sourness up front, then malt blooms.”

1932 Charrington’s Prince’s Brew. Appearance: Bottle is marked “Brewed by the Prince of Wales March 15, 1932.” “Clear, Ruby-orange color.” Aroma: “Old leather luggage and stewed dark fruit.” “Port winy aroma, tropical fruits.” Sharp aromas—Bretty and earthy.” Taste: “Lighter body than previous ones—nutty.” “Molasses and Havana Club 7-Year rum, a bit of horsy Brettanomyces, some lactic acidity, but very balanced with a clean finish.”

1929 Bass Princes Ale (brewed July 23, 1929). This was a hellish uncorking experience. As with some of the other older bottles, the middle of the cork came out with the corkscrew, leaving cork residue stuck to the sides of the bottle, to be scraped out and suctioned away by straw. Eventually the beer was poured through the cork-encrusted

neck, but with few cork bits ending up in the tasting glasses. Appearance: “Red brown, slight haze, some Co2!” Aroma: “Cocoa nose.” “Licorice aroma.” “Estery, alcoholic.” Taste: “Bitterness—more than any of the others yet.” “Some acidity, but there also remains considerable bitterness. This beer is not nearly so oxidized as the others, and generally seems more beer-like. It’s in astoundingly good shape.” “Malt, fruit, alcohol and delectable hops. Doesn’t taste its age, fair carbonation still there.”

1902 Bass Kings Ale, dated 22 June 1911, rebottled 1977. Appearance: “Nice intact pitch all around the cork of the bottle. Another nightmare extracting the cork.” “Aroma: “Citrus, tobacco, sour. Favorite yet!” “Sherry, horse leather, prunes and cigar box.” Taste: “Citric flavor, very lactic, some carbonation!” “Slight co2, smoky, sherry, leather.” Drinkability: “Somewhat aged with time, but still very drinkable.” “Not in great shape, but still very interesting.”

1869 Bass Ratliff Ale (Original gravity 1120!). The tasting notes got really hard to read a few beers back--at this point they’re almost impossible. Appearance: “Garnet hue,” “Dark brown and pours like motor oil.” Aroma: “Leather-licorice-rich, malty.” Taste: “Plummy sweetness. Madeira notes.” “...chocolate is all there and it rolls out complex fruits on a sweet backdrop with just the right level of acidity. Behind this comes the bitterness, still intact. Finally, the malt flavors step out. It finishes in fading waves, which go on for minutes. Stunning, a privilege to experience.” By this point, the whole group fell into reveries. “This is a Victorian beer—how cool is that? 1869—my family wasn’t even in America yet.”

In terms of aging, there was surprisingly little difference between beer from the 1960’s and the 1860’s. “Once a beer gets through 20 years or so, there aren’t any new flavors that are going to come out.” The similarity of many of these beers to port or sherry also came up for discussion. “It just goes to show the oxidized flavors are the same, it really doesn’t matter what it starts out as.”

The drinkability of beers this old also had all of us marveling. “What’s amazing to me is, you would never be able to taste food this old, but essentially this is liquid food! By making beer out of the malt, we’re eating malt that was made 140 years ago. And that’s pretty interesting—and pretty cool!”

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