

CASK MASTERS

LOCAL BREWERS BRING OLD-FASHIONED CASK ALE BACK TO LIFE BY SAMUEL WENDEL

Despite modern times and technology, the cask or “real” ale refuses to die. It’s like the John McClane of beer.

The traditional cask-conditioned style of beer is very much alive, and you can see its influence growing in Oregon’s craft beer industry, where local brewers like Plank Town in Springfield and Oakridge’s Brewers Union Local 180 are making concentrated efforts to keep it a living force in the beer world — a time and place far from the English and European pubs where they were once the norm.

But cask ale also lives in a more intrinsic manner: The secondary conditioning process the beer undergoes in a traditional cask involves elements of live yeast that allows the beer to ferment naturally — something that doesn’t happen in modern beers.

“You’re drinking a living product,” says Ted Sobel, the man responsible for Brewers Union Local 180, a welcoming brewpub that deals exclusively with cask ales. “It’s not artificial.”

Cask ales are born the same way as most beers, undergoing the same brewing procedure, though at the juncture when most modern beers would be pasteurized, filtered and infused with CO2 for carbonation, the cask ale goes its own way.

The result is a markedly different type of beer than you’ll find in a keg or in your standard bottled or canned beer. The cask ale is served warm, with only light carbonation. In the arena of taste it presents the same malty or hoppy flavors you’ll find in keg beers, but in a more pronounced and noticeable manner and with more complex nuances that are usually overpowered by cold serving temperatures and excessive carbonation.

The beer turns out this way because it is sealed in a cask — in the old days made of wood, but now sometimes plastic — with some of the living yeast still present, and then allowed to condition and mature on its own in the container, the very same container from which it’ll eventually be served via a hand pump called a “beer engine.”

It’s a process straight from the history books of beer, but despite stiff competition from modern practices and evolving public preferences, it remains relevant, according to Sobel and Plank Town’s Steve Van Rossem.

“It’s not your sports-bar kind of beer,” says Van Rossem, the head brewer at Plank Town and the man responsible for adding cask ales to the brewery’s beer repertoire.

Unlike most modern beer, cask ales are served at temperatures you would find in a pub cellar, usually somewhere between 50 and 55 degrees Fahrenheit, and are brewed at alcohol content levels between 3 to 5 percent — in stark contrast to most beers today, which are enjoyed ice cold and with higher alcohol content.

“Fifty degrees and above, the flavors come out,” Sobel says.



PLANK TOWN BREWING'S JOHN CRANE PULLS AN ALE WHILE STEVE VAN ROSSEM LOOKS ON



A COUPLE DINES AT BREWERS UNION LOCAL 180

Cask ales themselves are not a specific style of beer like an India pale ale or a porter, but rather a brewing process that can produce those styles in a more unique and traditional way; the difference is these ales don’t rely on excessive carbonation or chilling, things that can deaden the flavors.

“It’s not as sharp,” Van Rossem says. “You can pick up the nuances of the malt when you don’t drink artificially carbonated beer.”

And there’s also a social aspect to cask ales.

At Sobel’s brewpub, the beer is not meant for getting ruddy-faced and losing control of basic motor skills after one pint, but instead to be enjoyed for the tastes and social interactions they help produce.

“Cask ales are made for quaffing six to eight pints and holding a conversation all night,” Sobel says. “They’re not bizarre, high-octane beers; they just go down easy.”

And the public and the industry have taken notice. “There’s a small but dedicated following,” Van Rossem says.

“Interest is growing,” Sobel adds. “We get a lot of inquiries from other brewers who want to serve them.”

The beer industry may continue to grow and evolve, but the cask ale is eking out a toehold because brewers like Van Rossem and Sobel look to the future of beer by looking to the past, to an era when beer was simpler but vibrant and alive.

“You can taste the stuff,” Sobel says. “It’s not just something cold going down.” ■