



## The Pursuit of Hoppiness

I recently had the privilege of chairing the Golden Ales panel at the Champion Beer of Britain finals. We judges were presented with nine beers which ranged from very good to excellent; our winner, Castle Rock Harvest Pale, then went on to be crowned overall Champion Beer.

Until quite recently, Golden Ales were not regarded as a separate category of beer and, indeed, Harvest Pale is a previous winner of the Champion Bitter award. However, the growing popularity of the style means that few people would now argue that it's quite distinct from traditional bitter. CAMRA defines Golden Ales as being light in colour (obviously) with powerful hop aromas, low to strong bitterness and a strong hop character, often with citrus fruit tastes. What is becoming increasingly apparent though is that Golden Ales themselves are becoming more diverse.

At one end of the spectrum is the "traditional" Golden Ale, exemplified by Harvest Pale, where the citrusy hop flavours are balanced by some underlying sweetness leading to a zesty, more-ish finish. At the other extreme you find a new breed of ales which are both pale and massively hopped. The beer which our panel voted second - Marble Manchester Bitter - was a wonderful example of these intensively hoppy beers. Of course, you have to love hops to love such beers and not everyone inclines in that direction - but their increasing popularity suggests that there are plenty of "hop heads" out there.

The growth of truly hoppy beers can be traced back to the likes of Hop Back Summer Lightning and Wye Valley HPA in the late 1980s. In our own area, Oakham were local pioneers of the new style, starting with the still-wonderful JHB; they now brew a range of beers which you could say are all a variation on the same taste theme, but it's a hell of a theme. Their recent seasonal ale, Endless Summer, though only 3.4%, packed a huge hoppy punch. Another brewer making hoppy waves is Thornbridge, the innovative Derbyshire brewer whose Kipling South Pacific Pale Ale was beer of the festival at Cambridge this year (and their magnificent Jaipur IPA came third).

One reason for this spurt of interest in big hop beers is the increasing availability of new hop varieties from New Zealand - the likes of Nelson Sauvin, Riwaka and Motueka. These tend to have tropical fruit or berry flavours alongside the more usual citrusy ones, allowing skilful brewers to conjure up amazingly complex ales. America also supplies lots of assertive hops which are a far cry from Fuggles.

Can a beer be too hoppy? Well, it depends on your personal taste. I've yet to come across an ale with too much hop for me and this is despite a recent encounter with Steel City Independence Day Pale Ale, which I could still taste hours later! Gazza Prescott, the co-owner of this Sheffield operation, is a true hop evangelist. The brewery motto is "We know what hops are for" - the answer being to put vast quantities into their ales. At present their beers are all one-offs, but all are pale and hoppy and minus Crystal malt which the Steel City lads abhor! Sheffield itself is the best place to find their beers but they have been spotted in the Hand and Heart Peterborough.

Needless to say, all of the foregoing is in no way to decry the more traditional styles of ale. A key joy of real ale is, after all, its endless variety.