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LEVERAGING UNCOMMON BEER STYLES INTO SUCCESS

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A Commentary with Stephen Beaumont

In the early days of craft brewing, then microbrewing, virtually all ‘microbrews’ were crafted in uncommon styles. That was the point. The big breweries had pretty much abandoned all styles that weren’t pale or light lagers, so craft brewers in the 1980s sated the public’s thirst with the sort of beers people hadn’t seen in years: pale ales and porters, bocks and wheat beers, even Imperial stouts and barley wines.

As the 1980s turned into the 1990s, this approach faltered, but only slightly. In what the Wall Street Journal rather famously described as the death of microbrewing, the beer drinking public appeared poised to turn its collective back on this stylistic largesse and return to their old ways of drinking populist lagers which, absent their high-profile branding and expensive marketing campaigns, were rather remarkably similar.

It would indeed have been the death knell of craft brewing, except that as we all now know, it didn't happen. Instead, a new generation raised to legal drinking age during the era of microbrewing saw such beers as not anomalies, but the norm. The creative and innovative edge of the norm, to be sure, but definitely within the boundaries of convention.

Further, the breweries creating these beers were no longer so 'micro,' with companies like Boston Beer and Sierra Nevada and Sleeman and Big Rock developing national distribution networks and bruising their way into the top ten breweries in their respective countries in terms of size. Still far behind giants like Anheuser-Busch and Molson, of course, but definitely making their presence felt.

Simply, for all of their increasingly weird and wild styles, for all their bitterness battles and strength wars, craft brewing had become part of the North American beer landscape. And behind this two-decade evolution from outliers to the mainstream? An unerring reliance on beers outside of the ordinary.

It varied somewhat from country to country and region to region, of course, but many of the great success stories of the 1990s and early 2000s were based upon uncommon beer styles. Think about San Diego's Stone Brewing and their Arrogant Bastard, a beer absolutely no one would have at the time picked to become a flagship, or Adam from Portland, Oregon's Hair of the Dog, a beer in a historic Teutonic style that would have baffled even most Germans.

Think of Unibroue with its pioneering of Belgian beer styles in North America, and Celis Brewing in Austin after that, with Piere Celis' famed Celis White Belgian-style wheat beer. Or Alaskan Brewing with Alaskan Smoked Porter, perhaps not the brewery's absolute best-seller, but most certainly the beer that put the Juneau operation on the map.

By the start of the 2010s, this strategy had begun to change, but was still sufficiently well-regarded that it prompted Boston Beer Company alum Grant Wood to start his new Dallas-area Revolver Brewing Company with a decidedly off-the-wall brand.

"One day, while the brewery was under construction, a man from down the road showed up with a five gallon bucket of honey (that) had crystallized to the point that he couldn't sell it," recalls Wood, "I immediately said we could do something with it (and) my idea was to use this honey, blood oranges, and add a couple of spices to give the beer some complexity, targeting 7% alcohol because of my belief that 7% is an optimal level to express flavor."

"I called it Blood and Honey for obvious reasons (and) it quickly outgrew our other brands because there wasn't anything like it in the Dallas-Fort Worth market."

A similar story is related by Gilbert Nielsen, founder of Mexico City's Cervezería Calavera, for whom a 9% alcohol Mexican Imperial Stout represents 60% of total sales.

"I first brewed our Mexican Imperial Stout in 2009 because Mexico is famous for lighter beers (and) when you come up with something unusual people take notice," Nielsen recalls, "I also think that when you pay a premium price you should expect something different, so we created something really, really different."

Such beers also have the side effect of inspiring brand loyalty, as evidenced by the quite different successes of Toronto's Granite Brewery and Vancouver's Dageraad Brewing.

By emphasizing cask-conditioned ale in the former case and a flagship Belgian-style Blonde in the latter, both breweries have carved out for themselves a niche that beer drinkers have a hard time filling elsewhere. So Torontonians fans of British-style cask ales recognize that the Granite is their ideal destination, just as Belgophile Vancouverites embrace the white-labelled cans of the beer Dageraad founder Ben Coli says was the express reason he opened his brewery.

Somewhere in the late 2010s and early 2020s, however, despite its record of success this approach to brewing lost popularity. Perhaps it was because the unwavering success of IPAs blinkered brewers and brewery owners to other styles or maybe it related to a belief that there was nothing left that had not already been brewed, but for whatever reason the craft segment consolidated on a small number of styles and approaches.

Which is all fine and good for short term sales, which many needed desperately during pandemic times. But when many brands are similar and breweries lack the budgets to differentiate themselves via marketing, as the major breweries did during the pre-craft era, then consumers are apt to jump from one label to the next, showing loyalty only to a style and not to a company.

Which is not to say that such populist styles as hazy IPA and the emerging wave of Czech-style lagers need be ignored – for all of its passion for Belgium, Dageraad still brews an IPA, and Unibroue has its NEIPA de Tropiques-sur-le-Lac – but rather that distinctive styles still have the ability to establish and, importantly, maintain customer loyalty. And as Ben Coli has shown, it's not necessary to brew something that has never before been made, just to do it with skill, integrity, and authenticity.

Or in a paraphrasing of that famous movie line, if you brew it well, they will come back.

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