



TOPIC: LEADERSHIP

LOOKING BACKWARDS TO LOOK FORWARD

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A Commentary with Stephen Beaumont

Over the past two years, but especially through 2021, craft brewing has proved itself sufficiently creative and nimble that it has, for the majority, weathered the storm that is COVID-19. Capitalizing on local appeal and transitioning quickly and ably to direct-to-consumer delivery, where allowed, has meant that whenever we might exit this frustratingly persistent pandemic cycle, most breweries will emerge as strong or stronger than they were going in.

For that, craft brewing as a whole should take a bow.

Even so, challenges still await in the coming year and beyond, perhaps most concerningly the general slowing of craft beer growth, to the point that, once things finally do return to normal, it might not look much like growth at all. With this in mind, it can be beneficial to look back on developments in 2021 that might be managed a little better in 2022.

Getting the Message Across – At least in North America, and increasingly elsewhere, there exists a solid consumer base for craft beer, populated by individuals who understand how beer is made, recognize hop varieties by name, and are active participants on social media beer pages and ‘Beer Twitter.’ These folk form the heart of craft beer consumer community.

If craft is to continue to take over the beer space being steadily relinquished by the core brands of the international brewing giants, however, it must do more to appeal to those beer drinkers who are much less than fanatical about what they drink. To accomplish this, craft must be much more accessible than it presently appears.

The unqualified use of hop variety names, for example, is fine when appealing to the consumer who can recite off the top of their head at least the more popular varieties, but can be confusing or even off-putting for the aspiring craft drinker who may not be quite sure of the role hops play in beer. And as for the use of such ‘inside baseball’ terms as ‘DDH’ and ‘Kviek’ without corresponding explanations, well, in certain circles that may be seen as even more exclusionary.

Craft beer got its start in the 1980s and ‘90s by explaining to beer drinkers exactly what it is and why it’s different. In order to continue the expansion of its marketplace, perhaps 2022 is the year the industry should return to its roots in that regard.

Have Industry Trends Become the Tail Wagging the Craft Beer Dog? – Somewhere along the line – prior to 2020, for certain, but greatly and perhaps understandably exaggerated during the pandemic – craft breweries became followers rather than trailblazers. If we place the beginning of craft beer at the start of the 1980s, making for just over four decades of history, breweries belonging to the category have spent most of that history leading the way forward, whether through the adoption of new hop flavours, the use of non-traditional methods of fermentation, or the creation of entirely new styles. Lately, however, that has started to change.

For evidence of this shift, look no further than the rise of hard seltzer, which surprised the beverage industry with its stratospheric growth and was quickly added to the production schedules of countless craft breweries across North America. Ditto the hazy or New England style of IPA, which was admittedly a product of the industry, but which nonetheless became a force of remarkable magnitude, to the point that brewers and brewery owners alike would, in confidence, share that they didn’t particularly want to add the style to their portfolio, but felt commercially compelled to do so.

In light of the challenges now facing craft, from ebbing growth to ongoing pandemic restrictions and increasingly crowded store shelves, perhaps it is time for breweries to rediscover their roots and return to real innovation, although as per the above, always with accompanying explanations and education for beer consumers.

#MeToo and More – While it began the year prior, 2021 was widely and very publicly viewed as craft brewing’s #MeToo moment, although in reality it was that plus a whole lot more. Stories of not just sexism, but racism, transphobia, and other discriminatory behaviour were all alleged on various social media.

In many cases, the results were positive. Apologies were made, resignations accepted, measures taken to assure that such situations would not again arise, and codes of conduct adopted. Progress was undoubtedly made.

Still, there remains much more to be done. As much as numerous breweries, both actively accused and not, saw fit to make fundamental changes to their company culture last year, there were still others which, when challenged, issued rote apologies and promptly returned to business as usual, with little in the way of atonement or comeuppance.

In 2022, the craft brewing industry in North America and abroad can do better. Greater resolve must be made to not only assure that the brewing industry is one free of discrimination and harassment, but also one which values its employees and compensates them accordingly. Further, the industry must encourage its hospitality partners to make sure that their spaces are equally welcoming and non-judgemental. It is not just good business, it's the right and proper thing to do.