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TOPIC: QUALITY

## THE CONTINUING EVOLUTION OF THE BEER POUR

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## A Commentary with Stephen Beaumont

For the majority of the modern global history of draught ale and lager, the practice of the pour has been a matter of much passion and some contention.

Not counting the first several millennia of brewing history, when beer was stored in and poured from pretty much whatever container was available, even consumed directly from said storage vessel in Sumerian and Egyptian times, the earliest known method of non-gravity beer dispense was the handpump used to pour what we know today as cask-conditioned ale. And with that earliest evolution came also the earliest controversy.

In 1885, a man by the name of George Barker patented a device he called an "Aerator," but modern day publicans would know as a sparkler. A small, then-brass, now-plastic nozzle that fit at the end of the "swan's neck" tap portion of the cask ale pump, the sparkler has multiple small holes through which the beer is pushed, ensuring the resulting pint has a thick and dense head, rather than the thinner foam produced by a non-sparkler tap.

While you don't hear as many arguments in favour of or against the sparkler today, in the 1970s and '80s it was the subject of much discussion, with advocates generally residing in England's north and detractors in the south. The case for its use is mainly aesthetic, as it produces an unarguably better looking pint. Those against, on the other hand, argue – with some merit, in my opinion – that it softens the hop character and reduces the flavour impact of the ale.

Meanwhile, a little Irish company called Guinness was wrestling with a way to modernize a pour that required the use of two separate barrels of beer, a "high" and a "low," referencing both the differences between the beer in the barrels and the carbonation each possessed. The brewery did this by introducing a nitrogenated dispense coupled with a restrictor valve, what is universally recognized today as the Guinness or 'nitro' pour. Over the years since its widespread introduction in the 1960s, Guinness has managed to make its two-step pour an almost cult-like ritual, although whether or not it actually changes the taste of the stout is a matter of some conjecture.

The offspring of the Guinness tap is the "smooth flow" tap, introduced in England in the 1970s by brewers seeking the emulate the real ale experience from a keg rather than a cask. While it does persist to this day, the inexorable rise of the smooth flow tap was caught short by the development of the beer consumers group, Campaign for Real Ale, or CAMRA, which launched one of the most successful consumer movements ever in support of traditional cask ale, and implicitly against the incursion of the smooth flow.

(As an aside, I had the opportunity in the 1990s to taste test cask versus smooth flow versus nitrogenated 'widget' cans of Boddingtons Bitter, and found that the hop character in the beer was significantly reduced with each step from cask to can.)

Elsewhere in Europe, the "seven minute" pilsner pour grew popular and still persists in some parts of Germany, and has also been adopted and adapted by some breweries in North America. Adding a third or even fourth step to the Guinness method, the pilsner pour involves a regular draught tap with a tight restriction on its flow, creating a full glass of foam on the first pour. That pour is allowed to settle for a time and is then topped with another pour, which is in turn again allowed to settle. Eventually, after three or four pours, the pilsner is far less gaseous than it would have been otherwise, and topped with a collar of tightly compacted foam.

(Again, as an aside, I was able in the early 2000s to sample the same German pilsner with a regular and a seven minute pour and can attest that the slow poured beer was most certainly possessed of greater character and less gas.)

Beer pouring has long been considered a skill or, indeed, an art form in the Czech Republic, from where the sidepull faucets from the company, Lukr, have invaded many North American bars and breweries. Again, the key to any of the three – really two, but more about that later – main Czech beer pours is the foam, which is intended to be creamy and "wet." The main pour, the *hladinka* ('h'la-dinka'), involves restricting the side-pull faucet to create first a base of foam, then opening it up for the beer to result in a mug roughly three-quarters beer and one-quarter foam.

(Having on numerous occasions sampled the same beer with a straight pour and a *hladinka*, I can say with certainty that the traditional pour changes the beer for the better.)

A *šnyt* ('schnit') is basically the Czech version of a half-pint and involves filling a normal-sized mug with about twothirds foam and one-third beer. (You can also find this pour in parts of Bavaria, where it is known as a *Schnitt*.) The final Czech pour, a *mliko* ('m-leeko'), is effectively a full mug of foam and, I have been told by many a Czech barman, is mainly a novelty served to tourists, although it does have its adherents in North America.

All of which brings us to the most recent culture to fetishize beer pouring techniques, Japan.

Such is the fascination with beer pouring in Japan that there exist entire Instagram accounts devoted to videos of beer pours, including one with 109,000 followers. According to Masayoshi Kaji, director of the Japan Craft Beer Association, there is even a movement in some parts of the country to adopt the Japanese word for pourer, *Tsugite*, as a global standard for an exceptionally skilled beer server.

Beer service in Japan is divided into three camps, says Kaji: the ultra-fast sharp pour; the slower, three-part mild pour, itself reminiscent of the German pilsner pour; and, as he says, "something in between."

Beginning with a cold, wet glass, the sharp pour rushes the beer into the glass and, according to Kaji, relies upon "the tap's function to gently place the foam on top." A mild pour, on the other hand, is done in stages and removes more CO<sub>2</sub> from the beer, while the middle ground, he says, depends upon the pourer's skill and style of the bar in which it is served.

There is even a pour that eliminates foam altogether, producing a clear, headless glass of beer, which Kaji admits he doesn't fully understand, but "is useful as an introduction to one way of pouring."

If Japanese pours are to catch on in North America, it will be in part due to the work of Jenny Pfafflin, brewer at Chicago's Dovetail Brewery, and her partner in pours, Ziggy Maloni of the Beermiscuous bar in Highwood, Illinois, just north of Chicago.

Pfafflin's fascination with Japanese pours was born of a trip to Japan, where among other cultural experiences she drank at what is known as a *Tachinomi*, which literally translates to "standing while drinking alcohol." One such bar, Pfafflin says, is Standing Bar Shigetomi in Hiroshima, where the proprietor opens his bar for only 90 minutes a day and serves a single beer poured fifteen different ways.

Which is likely not replicable in Chicago, but as sure as the Lukr faucet has fast become the symbol of a bar committed to proper beer service, you can be certain that it won't be long until someone gives something similar a try.