

Cask v Keg – the debate has finally moved on

There has been a heated debate raging within CAMRA in recent years regarding the merits of craft/keg beer. You only have to glance at the letters page in CAMRA's monthly publication *What's Brewing* to appreciate the level of angst this subject brings about in some members. However, a recent article in the December 2015 edition of *What's Brewing* has brought some much-needed clarity to the situation and my experience at CAMRA's Manchester Beer & Cider Festival in January confirms that the debate has now moved on.

CAMRA was formed in 1971 to fight against the trend for cask-conditioned beers to be replaced by force-carbonated keg beers. Over four decades on, the word "keg" still has massive negative connotations for many people, leading to such beers being dismissed as "fizz". However, what those pioneering members were really fighting against was not the container but the product inside: not just too gassy and cold, but often made with low-quality ingredients, usually filtered and often pasteurised, killing much of the flavour in the process. CAMRA coined the term "real ale" to make it easy for consumers to differentiate between the bland processed beers being pushed then by the big brewers and the traditional beers whose very existence was under threat.

Real ale is defined by CAMRA as a beer brewed from traditional ingredients (malted barley, hops, water and yeast), matured by secondary fermentation in the container from which it is dispensed, and served without the use of extraneous CO₂. The presence of live yeast in the beer allows it to undergo a secondary fermentation in the cask, developing its flavour as it matures (thus it is "living" beer) and a light natural carbonation (hence the term "cask-conditioned"). CAMRA's crusade in the 1970s led to a renaissance of British brewing and the emergence in the 1980s of so-called microbreweries producing traditional beers.

The second renaissance of British brewing over the last 10 years or so has been inspired by the craft beer revolution in the US, where the absence of the traditional British approach using casks, which require careful handling in the cellar to ensure a quality product is served to the customer over the bar, and which have a shorter shelf-life due to oxygen (air) being admitted to the cask as the beer is dispensed, resulted in them adopting the more "modern" approach of using kegs. This renaissance has seen a resurgence in kegged beers, the vast majority of which have little in common with those of the 1970s and 1980s.

Unlike their predecessors, some modern brewers understand that flavour is reduced by filtering and particularly by pasteurising their beers, so they do not do it. In many cases the beers these brewers put into kegs is exactly the same as they put in their casks – complete with live yeast that will provoke a secondary fermentation in the keg; thus they are keg-conditioned. The only thing that stops these beers being real ale is that traditional kegs require the application of compressed gas (usually CO₂) to propel the beer to the bar. This is where "membrane kegs" come in.

The key keg (brand name "KeyKeg") was invented in 2006 by a Dutch company as a one-way container, to be filled once, used, and then disposed of. The key to the system is the bag-in-a-ball principle. The beer is sealed in a strong, flexible synthetic bag held inside a rigid plastic outer layer – originally a sphere but, these days, more commonly,

a tall cylinder. To serve the beer, the space between the bag and the rigid outer layer is filled with gas under pressure, forcing the bag to collapse and pushing the beer out to the bar. The gas does not come into contact with the beer so no extraneous CO₂ is introduced as it is in a pressurised system and so it makes no difference which gas is used (pubs will use CO₂ as it is on hand anyway). Importantly for CAMRA, the way membrane kegs works means if what went into the bag was real ale – unpasteurised, unfiltered beer containing live yeast – what comes out can still be real ale, matured by secondary fermentation in the container from which it is dispensed (keg-conditioned), but it may be much more highly-conditioned (gassy) than normal.

Membrane kegs, being disposable, are too expensive to replace returnable traditional casks, but they have advantages for breweries in certain circumstances: real ales can be delivered to irregular far-away venues without the worry of retrieving expensive casks. The down-side of this disposability is that some will consider them not to be environmentally friendly; however, they are working on this and, with "EcoKeg", which is designed to work with a handpump, the inner bladder and connector can be removed and replaced and the keg re-used. They also have some technical advantages. Not only does CO₂ not come into contact with the beer, neither does oxygen – the agent that causes real ale to go off within a few days. This allows real ale to be served in places that do not normally have enough throughput to sell a cask in three or four days. It also allows pubs to increase their range of real ales by stocking slower selling, stronger, speciality styles alongside their regular cask offerings.

Back in April 2015, delegates at CAMRA's Members' Weekend & AGM in Nottingham voted in support of Motion 13 to back the idea that real ale could come from a membrane keg provided it is differentiated by CAMRA-approved labelling. This motion was passed four years after CAMRA's Technical Advisory Group said that membrane kegs could contain CAMRA-approved real ale, a decision reached after taste trials at the Great British Beer Festival in London. The labelling scheme is yet to be launched, but some CAMRA beer festivals are already moving ahead and beginning to feature real ale in membrane kegs alongside that in cask. I attended CAMRA's Manchester Beer & Cider Festival in January and they had a separate "Real Ale in KeyKeg" bar alongside the traditional "Cask" bars. This certainly demonstrates that CAMRA is more progressive than some craft beer enthusiasts might think.

So, where does this leave us with the craft beer debate? Well, there is still no precise definition of craft beer equivalent to that of real ale and, without this, there is a risk of the craft beer industry being undermined by those wishing to jump on the rapidly accelerating craft beer bandwagon. Trying to define it in terms of the ingredients that can be used (in a similar manner to the German purity laws), or how it is packaged/dispensed (as CAMRA has effectively done with real ale) or the size of the brewery (as in the US) are all fraught with difficulty. There have even been suggestions that CAMRA ought to revise its definition of real ale in recognition of how the beer scene has moved on since the 1970s.

Whilst the UK craft beer industry wrestles with this dilemma, I like to think of craft beer as beer brewed using the finest ingredients for quality and flavour. Thus, much real ale is craft beer; and craft beer when in membrane kegs (and can be recognised as such) can be real ale!

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