

In search of the perfect brew

Australia's beer drinking culture has undergone some subtle changes in recent years. From having the dubious distinction of being "a country built on beer" that rejoiced in "the six o'clock swill" we've developed a more cultured appreciation of beers.

We've added specialist imported and Australian boutique beers to our national repertoire in the search for a deeper, more meaningful beer experience. The search for better brews and the Holy Grail of beers has led, inevitably, to Ian Partland of Steel River Brewery going the organic road.

"Boutique brewers and imports have opened up the minds of many people to a world outside the mainstream industrial beers which plague every bottle-shop, restaurant and bar in the country," he says.

"Australians are used to drinking high sugar adjunct beers and the majority of beer consumers still buy on price and habit, but an ever-growing sector of the market has gained a discerning taste."

Ian's reference to "high sugar adjunct" beers refers to the practice of most commercial brewers adding up to 30% cane sugar syrup to the mash rather than extra quantities of the more expensive malted barley, a practice that Ian says is abhorrent to traditional brewers. Sugar syrup ferments to alcohol but adds no body, colour or aroma. Steel River's organic beer, Virgin Blonde lager, uses no adjuncts.

"Practically all mainstream beers in Australia have up to 35% sugar adjunct, which gives a distinctive flavour and mouth-feel that only Australians exposed to the ad campaigns seem to appreciate," Ian says.

"Elsewhere in the world, the adjunct is determined by which crop is available the cheapest. The Asians use rice, in England and the US it is usually maize. Both of these are superior adjuncts to sugar, but

require cooking prior to use and hence are not as cheap or convenient as sugar syrup."

Ian says that since the 1980s small brewers have striven to sensitise our palates to quality beers, and as a result there has been a consolidated growth in all malt beers.

"However, they are dearer to make, so the growth is limited to those who are willing to pay for the privilege of drinking proper beer."

The domestic market has been difficult to woo but persistence and quality product are overcoming market reluctance.

"It has been difficult to break into the market," he says. "Organic certification is seen as an advantage by some retailers; others couldn't care less, but most storekeepers don't want to try something new if they're not sure that it will sell. The big retailers want to see if it works before buying in. We're the first ones offering organic beer so we have to be persistent and position it as something that's different."

Ian says that the export market for Australian organic beer holds real potential. There has been interest expressed from the USA, and Japan, which has an already established domestic market for Japanese and European organic beer and could look favourably on our brews, particularly in view of Australia's "clean, green" reputation. Ian says choosing the means of entry into the Japanese market presents a dilemma.

"The niche market is available there, the question is whether to access that market through organic channels or liquor channels."

Ian's entrée to full-scale commercial brewing was via home brew retailing. He established the Steel River Brewery in late 2005 and in 2008 was approached by Chris Gordon, who has an organic wine, chicken and fertiliser business, to make a certified organic beer with him. For Ian, this was a re-introduction to organics; in 1994 he had been involved in a textile operation with Coulton farming, growing organic cotton at Goondiwindi.

"I could see how far the industry had come since then, and the growth in Europe and USA of organic beer sales was noteworthy," says Ian.

"Adapting the brewery to produce certified organic beer was fairly straightforward; the differences between conventional and organic brewing are fundamentally the use of organically grown barley and hops, and not using the myriad of processing chemicals which aid throughput in conventional breweries. We have a strict cleaning regime in the brewing process, so no major changes were necessary to adapt to certified practices."

The recipes used are the brewery's own, based on the Reinheitsgebot. This 16th century Bavarian/ German law, first

Brewing; an introduction to the mysteries

Natural beer uses barley grain that has been partially germinated to convert its starches into soluble sugars, a process called "malting". The malted barley is then fermented with yeast to produce alcohol and carbon dioxide bubbles producing the brew's distinctive flavour, aroma and mouthfeel.

Beer flavour is determined by how much the grain is roasted, the variety and quantity of hops used, the processing parameters chosen by the brewer, whether an adjunct is used and the choice of yeast.



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Ian Parfild, Steel River Brewery.



propounded in 1487, protected the purity of beer by limiting its ingredients to water, barley and hops. It also limited the price of beer to 2 pennies a litre, a practice which has sadly fallen into disuse. (Yeast was a later addition, subsequent to Pasteur's discovery of the role of microorganisms in fermentation.) Despite repeal of the Reinheitsgebot by the EC in 1987, most German breweries continue to adhere to it in the interests of producing traditional high-quality beer.

The use of organic produce puts extra demands on the brewery's supply line in sourcing ingredients that are not easy to come by.

"Hops are a cold climate crop and are grown in Tasmania and the Victorian highlands but we source our organic hops from New Zealand, which appears to be more advanced in the supply of organic hop varieties," Ian says.

"Barley is more problematic as the protein level in organically farmed barley is generally too high for brewing. With lower rainfall, this problem appears to be exacerbated. Our yeast is sourced from the USA."

When is a beer a lager? Ian answers it's only another terminology. "Lager is beer. In fact, lager is the German word for the process of cold storage for flavour stability which beer goes through after fermenting," he says.

"There are confusing terms such as top fermenting (ales) and bottom fermenting (lager) when in reality the fermenting takes place in every molecule of the beer throughout the batch for both ales and lagers. Now that we have the ability to study DNA sequencing, it turns out that both ale and lager strains are genetically the same."

Ian says that the growth in demand for the low-carbohydrate beers indicates to him that a growing sector of the beer-drinking public

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desires a "healthier" product, which low carb. beer is perceived to be.

"Enzymes are sometimes used to diminish the maltiness in dry and low-carb. beers, often to such a degree that Xylitol (a sweetening adjunct) is then added back in to give the beer some artificial mouth-feel.

"While we can't argue that any alcoholic product is healthy, clearly it is possible for some to be less healthy than others. Our organic beer has less harmful additives - our barley and hops are grown without industrial fertilisers, pesticides, weedicides or fungicides and the finished product is free from residues from farming or storage, preservative processes and industrial cleaners, and from chemical additives such as flavours, colours, preservatives and chemical fining agents."

The sad news for the DIY aficionado is that there are no Steel River organic home-brewing kits on the horizon at this stage; Ian says that it is difficult to source the supply of organic barley for even the brewery's requirements at this stage. 