

MAKE TIME FOR A FOREIGN AFFAIR AND SLAKE YOUR THIRST WITH PREMIUM BEERS BASED ON BAVARIAN AND BOHEMIAN STYLES CHAMPIONING 'BITTER IS BETTER', WRITES FELICITY CARTER.

Beer used to be something you didn't have to think very hard about. But in the past couple of years, everything has changed. A new wave of microbreweries has introduced hand-crafted, mostly unpasteurised, beers to the market. And while the sales of Australian beers are declining, imported beers are flowing in, with offerings from Europe, England, Japan and Mexico crowding liquor store fridges.

"It's a global trend," says Stuart Gregor, host of the annual Sydney International Beer Festival. "Beer is becoming a premium product. Aussies are beginning to show interest in beer flavours, trying beers with more bitterness and hops characters."

In some ways it's a trend to the way beer used to be. The majority of beer consumed in the world today is a variation on the styles developed in Bavaria and Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) in the 1840s.

"In Europe, the brewers developed the technique of storing beer at low temperatures, a process they called 'lagering', after the German word to store," explains Nick Sterenberg, operations manager for South Australia's Coopers Brewery. "They stored it because they were brewing it during winter and they wanted to keep it during summer. They found the beer that came out tasted better."

At the same time, he says, the Bohemians perfected glass manufacture. "Up until then, people were using potter mugs," he says. "Once the drinking vessels were glass, everybody wanted to drink a clear beer. The lager beer style, particularly the Czech Pilsner, travelled all the way around the world and is now the vast majority of modern beer."

Lager and Pilsner are honourable beer styles. The problem, says Sterenberg, is that the global trend has been towards brewing beers that are inoffensive, and less bitter, so they have the widest possible appeal. "Beer has become homogenised."

While bitterness is an acquired taste, Sterenberg says it's worth the effort. Coopers Brewery, founded in 1862, continues to use its original recipes, making robust ales with more bitterness than commercial lagers. As the backlash against boring beer inspires brewers to revive old recipes and brewing methods, or to try new ones, they're being joined by other craft-oriented beer makers.

"Things have improved out of sight in the past five years," he says. "Coopers has always been an artisanal beer, but now you've also got Little Creatures from Western Australia, plus a bunch of really good little breweries, like Mountain Goat."

Even the beer cafe concept is moving beyond copies of what happens in Belgium and Germany. Sydney's Redoak Boutique Beer Café, which opened

in 2004, is a cafe that serves fine Australian cuisine alongside the 30 or so different styles of beer that come from its own brewery.

"We do a few styles that haven't been brewed for a few hundred years," says co-owner and brewer David Hollyoak. "A good example would be the Baltic Porter that originated 300 years ago but which stopped production about 1950."

Hollyoak says that Redoak's customers are clearly looking for a new taste experience and are willing to experiment with food and beer matching. "Beer's an amazing product because it can be matched with all the food groups, including seafood and meats, spicy dishes and any type of dessert."

Beer lovers now have plenty of international beers to choose between, from popular offerings like Belgium's Stella Artois and Mexico's Corona, to lesser-known gems like Old Fart Beer and Waggle Dance from England. Although major brands like Stella Artois and Becks are brewed here in Australia, imported beers need to be carefully checked for expiration date because most beer goes stale between three and six months after bottling.

"In Germany they have this saying, 'Only drink the beer if you can see the brewery,'" says Hollyoak.

Fortunately, there's a lot of fresh, interesting beer headed to pubs, clubs and bottle shops near you. And restaurants, too, as interest increases. It's a long way from standing around with a stubbie.

:: A FIELD GUIDE TO BEER

- :: **Ale:** Brewed from barley malt with a top-fermenting yeast that ferments quickly. The hops give the beer its trademark bitter taste.
- :: **Lager:** Brewed from the bottom fermenting yeasts, in a slower process that produces a paler, drier and less alcoholic beer.
- :: **Pilsner or Pils:** Czech-style golden lager that is well-gassed.
- :: **Bitter:** British ale made with plenty of hops, hence the bitterness.
- :: **Stout:** Dark and rich Irish ale.
- :: **Wheat beer:** German-style ale made from a mixture of malted wheat and malted barley. The Belgian Witbier version may have coriander or orange peel added for extra interest.
- :: **Trappist ale:** Connoisseur beers made from wild yeasts by Belgian Trappist monks.
- :: **Fruit beer:** Beers, typically Belgian, that have fruits added during fermentation. The beers may be named for the fruit, such as Framboise, which is ale made with raspberries. Sounds girly but, surprisingly, will put hair on your chest.