

BEER IS ON THE RISE

HUMBLE BEER HAS COME A LONG WAY. FROM MASS-PRODUCED LAGER TO BOUTIQUE BREWS, BEER'S GONE POSH! MATT KIRKEGAARD REPORTS ON THE BEER REVOLUTION SWEEPING AUSTRALIA.

Cast off the cabernet, move on from Manhattans, there's a new drink capturing the palates of Australia's gourmets. With flavour profiles ranging from light and crisp with banana-and-clove notes, through to full-bodied types with chocolate highlights and well-rounded finishes, you can match it with everything from seafood entrees to rich mousse desserts. So what is this latest libation? Drum roll please... introducing the not-so-humble beer.

Let's be clear – we're not talking about VB and XXXX, as popular as those brews may be. It's premium Australian beers such as those from Redoak Boutique Beer Café and James Squire, and imported names from Belgium, Germany and Asia that are bringing new-found respectability to beer. With chains of Belgian Beer Cafes springing up around the country and Pilseners knocking pinots off the beverage lists of the finest restaurants, beer has never been posher.

Although beer has been the essential ingredient for backyard barbies since fire was invented, it has never really been taken seriously by epicures (cultured types). To suggest matching beer to food five years ago would've meant a quick trip to the bar for a packet of salted peanuts. Now, however, beer has made its way into the finest restaurants with beer lists approaching the length of those for wine, and food menus being designed around them.

To understand why beer is no longer just a great match for pizza and footy, but also the perfect match for a delicately spiced fillet of Atlantic salmon, you'll need to overhaul your perception of what beer is. Ian Watson, billed as Australia's first beer sommelier, considers the Australian concept of beer very narrow, including only one or two members of what is actually a very large family.

"In Australia, we've been trapped in the one style or interpretation of beer – mass-marketed basic lager – for many years," Ian says. Breaking free of this thinking is what's driving the current rise of beer.

"People are discovering that beer is not one beverage, it's a multitude of beverages that contain a myriad of flavours. As people are realising this, they're finding out how it can work in with food," he says.

"You can enjoy a beer with everything from poached pear to a curry," he says. "People are discovering beer for what it is."

The fact Ian is employed as the resident beer expert in a hotel in Toowoomba, a large country town 126km west of Brisbane, is testament to the breadth of the beer revolution. The Spotted Cow Hotel's Oropa Beer Cafe boasts over 40 bottled beers on its international beer list.

Given the task of recommending the perfect beer to match your meal, Ian may steer you towards a French 3 Monts to accompany an entree of mussels Provencale, followed by an English Fuller's London Pride paired with rib on the bone with brandied pepper, before closing with a Belgian dark ale called Forbidden Fruit, matched to rich chocolate ice-cream.

Enjoying a meal with Ian as your guide is like taking in dinner and a show. Each beer is meticulously served in the right glass, which could be anything from an English pint glass to a brandy snifter or even a champagne flute. All the while Ian explains the hints and undertones in the beer that make it the perfect match to your meal.

Interestingly, some beers like the 3 Monts are corked rather than capped and are opened with a flourish of the corkscrew. In this world, not only has beer become a replacement for wine in the glass, but also for the theatre that's been lost to the dining room since wine went screw-cap.

While some Australian restaurants are serving the best beer from around the world, others are carving out a name by brewing it for themselves.

Boutique brew-cafes, such as Sydney's Redoak Boutique Beer Café, are making their mark with their own range of brewed beers, matched to an impressive contemporary food menu.

Redoak burst onto the scene when it won a swag of awards, including four Best in Class honours, at the 2004 Australian International Beer Awards. It was only their first attempt yet they managed to upset big-name entrants including Coopers, Hahn, Cascade and James Squire – all this before the cafe had even opened its doors. Many said they couldn't do it again this year but they fared even better – walking away with 35 awards in total and setting a new record by winning the most awards in one year by any brewery since the awards began.

Co-director – and reformed champagne drinker – Janet Hollyoak believes a venture like Redoak is only possible because our beer tastes are changing and attributes this change to Aussies travelling widely and often.

She explains that the quality of food and wine in Australia is truly world-class so travellers aren't surprised by their dining experiences when they go overseas, but it's a different story when it comes to beer.

"People travel overseas a lot more and they jump on the plane leaving what they 'know' is the world's best country when it comes to beer," Janet explains. "So, when they go overseas they want to try the beers. They do try the wines, they do try the food, but it's the beer that catches them by surprise.

"They come home and their expectations are a little bit higher. So as a result there's now that demand for better beers."

And it's a demand Redoak is intent on satisfying, producing 19 different styles of beer including Vienna Lager, Blackberry Hefeweizen and their signature beer, Framboise Froment. If any brew is going to challenge our notions of beer, and some men's masculinity, this is it. A Belgian-style wheat beer brewed with fresh raspberries, the Framboise sits golden-pink in the glass.

Of course, a beer like this isn't served in any old glass, but a flute for the girls and a balloon for the boys. Janet says the flute accentuates the beer's sweetness, while the balloon draws out the hoppy bitterness preferred by the blokes. And you thought the biggest choice was between a middie and a schooner!

With another beer made of blackberries, and yet another infused with the finest dark Belgian chocolate, as well as the more traditional Pale Ales and Pilseners in its range, Redoak is in the leading wave of a change that's more revolution than fad.

Both Ian and Janet say that those who appreciate wine are usually among the fastest to adopt new beers.

"If they love wine it means they love to sit down and relax and actually smell something in the glass, then taste it and appreciate it. They're the people who are enjoying Redoak," Janet says.

So, what do you say, are you ready to put down the XXXX and pick up a Framboise Froment? Your mates may laugh at you at first, but you better believe they'll be swiping your bottle once they get a taste.

BEER 101: THE BASICS

Beer: Made from four essential ingredients – water, malted grain, yeast and hops. During the fermentation process, yeast metabolises the sugar in the malt, producing alcohol and carbon dioxide.

Hops: A flower (a relative of cannabis) that contributes to the aroma and adds bitterness to balance the sweetness of the malt

Ales and lagers: Ales are brewed using yeasts that ferment at the top of the vessel at slightly warmer temperatures while lagers use yeasts that ferment at the bottom. Ales are typically more flavoursome than lagers, which tend to be crisper and drier.

Pilsener: A distinct type of lager named after the Czech town in which it was created, Pilsen. Saaz hops give Pilseners a spicy zing added to its floral aromas. A refreshing beer, it's well matched to spicy foods like Thai.

Wheat beers: Beers made primarily with malted wheat rather than the more common malted barley. Hoegaarden is an example of a Belgian 'witbier'. German wheat beers include the cloudy Hefeweizen and the filtered Kristallweizen. Redback is a well-known Australian example. Thanks to their lemony zing, these beers go well with seafood.

WHERE TO GO FOR A MEMORABLE COLDIE

SYDNEY

Redoak Boutique Beer Café
201 Clarence Street, Sydney
Call (02) 9262 3303

MELBOURNE

Gunn Island BrewBar
102 Canterbury Road, Middle Park
Call (03) 9690 1958

CANBERRA

The Wig & Pen
Canberra House Arcade, Alinga St, Canberra Call (02) 6248 0171

PERTH

Little Creatures Brewery
40 Mews Rd, Fremantle
Call (08) 9430 5555

BRISBANE

Belgian Beer Café Brussels
Cnr Mary and Edward Streets, Brisbane
Call (07) 3221 0199

NEW ZEALAND

Dux de Lux Restaurant Bars & Brewery
Cnr Hereford and Montreal Streets, Christchurch
Call +64 3 366 6919

BELGIAN BEER CAFÉS

Sydney: 135 Harrington St, The Rocks
Call (02) 9241 1775
Melbourne: 557 St Kilda Road, Melbourne
Call (03) 9529 2899
