

The taste of beer

Zak Avery

There's a poignant video of Michael Jackson on the Youtube website, made by Daniel Shelton of the American beer importers Shelton Bros. It's poignant because it was made around a month before he died, and shows how Parkinson's Disease had started to take hold of him. Near the start of the interview, as Shelton is asking a few preliminary questions, the talk quickly turns to the taste of beer. Responding to a question about what sort of beers he favoured, MJ says:

I'm interested in the taste more than anything else. The overall package is interesting, but ... you know ... I mean, drink is about taste, I always thought, I could never understand it when people, well ...

At this point, MJ grabs the hem of his T-shirt and pulls it taut so that the slogan written on the front of it is clear to read. It says 'Beer. If you can't taste it, why bother?'

With his writing so well-known, and his six-part TV series *The Beer Hunter* still unmatched in terms of content and presentation, it's hard to conceive of a time when all that knowledge didn't exist. The ease with which people can now

communicate about beer is largely descended from the work that MJ did in his career. But as MJ wore this knowledge so casually, it's easy to forget that he, like all of us, was not born with that knowledge. It's a knowledge that he acquired, and passed on. When he started out, the language of modern beer writing did not exist. The concept that one could appreciate the tastes and flavours of something that was as seemingly mundane as beer was also a new one. Not only did MJ help develop the modern lexicon of beer writing, but he also blazed the trail that all beer writers now walk.

There is no way to talk about beer without resorting to talking about its taste. One can talk about the history of beer, or beer styles, on the regional variations of beer around the world, but ultimately it comes down to one thing: What does it taste like? If it doesn't taste good, it isn't good beer. The dilemma of the modern writer is that now we have a fully-developed lexicon of flavours, how can we deploy them to best effect? We are trying to cross-breed two different species. The verbal modality and the sensory one are completely separate. In all instances of taste, there is a subjective experience

of flavour that is mapped onto an appropriate word to describe it. It is not a direct cause and effect relationship, but one that is painstakingly learned over time.

So for example, an ordinary English best bitter (let's use Bateman's XXXB as an example) might be said to taste malty. That's indisputably true, but it doesn't communicate anything, other than the fact that it is more malty than it is hoppy. I can take a sip of this glass of XXXB in front of me and tell you that it tastes of nutty, toasted malt, with a deeper nuttiness and fleeting ripe fruitiness mid-palate, followed by more nuttiness and a faintly spicy, earthy pithiness to the finish. If we check MJ's *Great Beer Guide* (2000), we see his note on it:

It starts malty (the barley variety is Maris Otter) and sweetish, developing some plummy fruitiness, then an aniseedy spiciness, and finally a clean dryness.

I didn't pick out the aniseed note, and still can't after reading that tasting note. But I can get the plums, and the clean dryness he talks about. I'm not for a second suggesting that I'm a better taster than MJ was, but what has happened in the decade since the *Great Beer Guide* was published is that the lexicon of beer writing has expanded. Well, if I can't find that aniseed note, then perhaps the beer may have changed a bit too, but you take my point.

All through his writing, there are points at which he is almost apologetic for subject-

ing beer to such analysis. For example, from *The English Pub* (1976), talking about how beer is best appreciated in pints:

People who drink half-pints are apt to grasp the beer glass awkwardly, with their little finger sticking out. Anyone who adopts this sort of effete mannerism might be expected to be a half-pint person. Beer-drinking is a robust activity and fancy behaviour is not encouraged.

Fast forward more than two decades, and MJ is now apologising for his techniques of beer appreciation. In the *Great Beer Guide*, he demonstrates how to best release the aroma from a beer:

A gentle swirl disturbs the beer enough to help release its aromatic compounds. This level of study might best be pursued at home, as serious swirling might easily be thought pretentious when conducted in a bar or restaurant.

Reading that, I'm almost surprised (and relieved) MJ had the pretension to consider beer worthy of study at all - but thankfully he did. In *The English Pub* he wrote:

There is no such thing as a definitive English beer taste. A scientist who attempted what he describes as 'a sensory analysis of beer flavours' in England, in order to produce a 'standard vocabulary of tastes,' found that his respondents used more than 250 terms to describe the beer they drunk. These ranged from 'sickly', to 'toffee-like' and 'buttery' to 'nutty', 'earthy' and 'cabbagy'.

One of the key tenets of MJ's work is that of beer styles. Indeed, there are people who claim that it was his work that prevented some of the more unusual continental beer styles from extinction. Not only was he the person who did most to establish the notion that beers are part of a family, and that each part has an archetype, but also that there is a very clear scientific process in the production of beer that gives an end result that is best described in terms more poetic than prosaic. It is as though the combination of science and art that characterises a brewers craft is best reflected in language that combines both of these modes. So wherever we see MJ describing a beer, there is a combination of technical and descriptive terms. The interesting thing to observe is how these change over time.

Fuller's ESB is one example that appears in MJ's books over time, and clearly illustrates both the development of the language of beer writing, and his deployment of it. So in *The English Pub*, ESB is described thus; 'Fuller's "Extra Special" is probably England's strongest draught bitter'. In *The New World Guide to Beer* (1988), we have this for ESB:

The same brewery's delicious ESB (1055+) is the strongest regular beer in Britain. The initials stand for Extra Special Bitter. The gravity is by no means massive, but it is high for a bitter.

In *The Beer Companion* (1997, 2nd ed.), we are assaulted by a plethora of brack-

eted figures, and ESB is described in comparison to it's sibling brews:

[Chiswick Bitter's] floweriness derives not so much from the Northdown and Challenger in the kettle, but from a dry-hopping with Goldings. After Chiswick (1034; 8.5; 2.8; 3.5) [OG, Plato, %abv and %abw respectively] come London Pride (1040; 10; 3.3; 4.1) and ESB (Extra Special Bitter: 1054; 13.5; 4.4; 5.5). The London Pride perhaps best expresses the house character of Fuller's: a soft texture at the front of the mouth (a less bicarbonate, more chloride, water?); strong maltiness; and a honey-flower character from the house yeast. The persistently award winning ESB is, and that results in a powerful combination of the characteristics displayed by its smaller brother brews.

And in the *Great Beer Guide* he notes that the style (Fuller's ESB had by then become the archetype for a new beer style) is

... (fuller in colour, maltier, fruitier, and less hoppy than an IPA). The original from Fuller's is malt accented, but with a robust balance of hop bitterness, the two flavours held together by honeyish esters from the house yeast.

What we can see here is a move from describing the facts behind a beer, to the development of talking about a beer's flavours, and to a greater or lesser degree also reflecting on the technical processes that are part of that specific beer, that particular flavour profile. Don't forget that earlier we saw that at the time MJ was writing *The English Pub*, there

was the start of the movement to examine and codify flavour. But at that point, talking about the flavour of beer wasn't the done thing - or at least, it wasn't the *raison d'être* for writing about beer. At that point, beer was still a cultural artefact, part of the general British heritage, and treated more or less without delineation, other than by region, strength or colour.

There is a move in MJ's writing from an amateur understanding (in the true sense of the word, the amateur as a lover of something), to an adoption and, crucially, a demonstration of understanding of technical terms, to a move towards describing beers purely in sensory terms. It's this journey that allows me today to hold up an oversized wine glass of beer, give it a good swirl, and say 'ah, biscuity pale malt, tangerines and a hint of black pepper and bay leaf' without the slightest hint of embarrassment. Many people say that actually I should be embarrassed, but I believe it's important to keep that lexicon moving forwards.

Brewer, Mike McGuigan, now at Brimstage Brewing, writes on his blog:

While I was at ZeroDegrees, we won a couple of beer awards, one judged by MJ, so he came out to see us - he is a big part of why I became a brewer, so it was a really big deal for me having him there. We somehow ended up talking about food & drink TV presenters, I said that people like Jilly Goolden maybe do more damage than good - putting people off with their annoying over-the-top delivery. MJ replied that she was a

good friend of his & that in her early days he had advised her to be as enthusiastic and dynamic as possible ...

To put it more clearly, the body of work that MJ left behind is an archive of the development of how we talk about beer flavours. But just as talk about whether such-and-such beer is as good as it once was, so the way we talk about that beer has changed, and will continue to change. Indeed, it must continue to change to keep pace with the developments in contemporary brewing. MJ's career encompassed the renaissance of real ale, the creation of Belgium as a global brewing icon, and the development of the craft brewing scene in the USA. The challenge now is not just to be able to describe the flavours in the beers, but to do so in a way that communicates the passion behind each glassful.

While the classic beers will endure, there is already a definitive tasting note in existence for them. It might err on the side of prosaic rather than the poetic, but then perhaps that actually reflects what it stirred in the mind of the person who wrote the tasting note. Taste descriptors alone are not enough to describe the new generation of craft beers that are currently being produced on small scales by breweries with big ambitions. One beer I tried recently smelled of sweet caramel and pine-needle hops so intense that they took my breath away. But how to communicate that? If beer is exciting to drink, shouldn't that too become part of the tasting lexicon?

While it may not be to every reader's (or drinker's) taste, the blog post that I ended up writing about this beer included the sentences

... drink it, marvelling at the toasted red-amber colour, the nose so redolent of sweet toffeeish malt and pungent, almost mentholated hops that it takes your breath away. Be washed away on the crescendo of caramel and pine needles in the finish.

This conforms to the standard convention of a tasting note, where you pick out some flavours that will be familiar to everyone, and assemble them in the sequence that you experience them. But it also tries to convey the experience of drinking it. You could argue that this might turn people off of beer, but equally, it might provoke curiosity in those who have never tried beer. And for beer to flourish, all communicators about beer, written or broadcast, need to find a way to engage the curious consumer.

As independent beer writer Melissa Cole points out, there is more to talking about beer than describing it as malty or hoppy, and given the huge variety of flavours that each of these ingredients. Malt can smell and taste of hay, biscuits, nuts, toffee, fruitcake, coffee, chocolate and smoke, to name a few. Equally, hops can taste of, well, almost anything; lemon, grapefruit, passion fruit, mango, black-currant, cool mint, floral and even orange pith. Hearing her earlier this year on national radio describe a stout as tasting of 'bitter chocolate and espresso with

some crushed up Maltesers on top' was a great moment. Whenever I hold a beer tasting event, and the dark beers come out, people seem to fear them. Explain to them that if they have a palate that can enjoy dark chocolate and coffee, then they have a palate that can enjoy stout, and they take to it like a duck to water. Couch barley wine as liquid Christmas cake (and just as good with cheese), and the fear of drinking an unusually strong beer is banished. Having held many events where non-beer drinkers become converts, I know that all they need is a frame of reference for the flavours that they experience, and they are happy. Not everyone can easily identify a flavour in a beer, but if you tell them what flavours and aromas to look for, the task is considerably easier (and much more enjoyable). Once you point out sweetcorn aroma on a commercial lager, or figs on a Trappist dubbel, it's hard to smell anything else in the glass.

I was lucky enough to attend the launch of Fuller's Brewer's Reserve No. 2 at last year's Great British Beer Festival. Introducing how the Brewer's Reserve series came about, head brewer John Keeling explained that a few years ago, he was asked by Fuller's what new project he'd like to undertake. His response was 'I'd like to explore time'. Leaving aside the notion of John Keeling as the next Dr. Who, this rang a bell with me. When I talk about beer to groups of people, I explain that not only is beer-drinking a fully three-dimensional experience that uses all of our sense, but it also engages the fourth dimension, time.

It may seem unusual to talk about the temporal experience of a beer, but like many other sensory experiences, tasting beer is something that we do over time, both in the sense that it takes a while for us to look, sniff and slurp at a glass of beer, but also what happens once the beer is in our mouth. To (hopefully) make this analogy clearer, let's look at another sensory experience that is also experienced across time - music.

When we listen to music, we perceive it to be a more-or-less continuous stream, with each note (or chord, or synthesised squelch) linked to the one before. The notes don't happen in isolation - they happen in relation to one another, and create a whole that we experience over time. How we feel about that whole is a subjective conclusion, but our experience of it is mediated by time, shaped by what has gone before, in a succession of sensations that blend to a single experience. With practice, it's possible to parse this whole into separate experiences.

Perhaps a more useful way of using music as an analogy is to look at how separate sounds are technically described. Key to this discussion are the concepts of attack, decay, sustain and release. In musical terms, attack is the opening part of a sound, the move from silence to peak volume. Consider the difference in initial sensations of a classic soft Pilsner beer and a tart lambic. Decay is the length of time taken from the peak of the attack to the sustained note. In beer terms, this might be the transition

from the first taste to the flavour of the beer revealing itself. Sustain can be thought of as the the actual perception of flavour itself - the mouthfeel, the aroma and the palate. Release is what happens after the swallow, the shift from flavour to aftertaste, and the length of finish.

But this only describes the temporal sequence of events that goes to make up an individual sound. In acoustic technology, everything else that isn't referred to with these four terms is called 'timbre', which in beer terms would be flavour. Of course, I'm not the only person who has thought of describing beer in these terms - beer historian Martyn Cornell performed an experiment maturing two bottles of Meantime IPA, one in a cool cupboard in London, the other in the outdoor heat of the Abu Dhabi summer. Here's part of how he describes his findings on his blog:

[T]he IPA that had stood on the Tropic of Cancer being gently baked was deeper, rounder than the same beer that had been kept in conditions no hotter than a chilly English Spring. With the hot-matured IPA the Goldings 'Seville orange' was even more marmalade-y, the malt more rotund, more caramelly. The stay-at-home IPA was silver trumpets, with everything higher, brighter; the well-travelled, 'maderised' version was golden trombones, a baritone to its brother's tenor.

Clearly then, there are many ways that we can talk about the taste of beer; the technical, physical properties; the aromas and flavours, what they remind us of and what they stir in us; where a beer

sits in a brewery's range, or within the stylistic pantheon. But the simple act of focusing on what a beer does as it passes over your palate, noting the attack, mid-palate and finishes, picking our aromas and flavours, is the overlooked key to wringing every last piece of flavour and enjoyment from this humble drink that we so love. That is the art of tasting beer. And after all, if you can't taste it, why bother?

It's a regret of mine that I never met Michael Jackson. As I was starting to make inroads into professional beer writing, he passed away. Consequently, throughout this article, I refer to him as MJ - it seems overly familiar to use the first name of a man I never met, but absurd to refer to someone so familiar to beer lovers just by his surname.

Bibliography

- Cornell, M. *Zythophile* blog.
<http://zythophile.wordpress.com/>
- Jackson, M. (1976) *The English Pub: A Unique Social Phenomenon*. London: Quarto.
- Jackson, M. (1997) (2nd ed.) *Michaels Jackson's Beer Companion*. London: Mitchell Beazley.
- Jackson, M. (1991) *The New World Guide to Beer*. London: Apple.
- Jackson, M. (2000) *Great Beer Guide: 500 Classic Brews*. London: Dorling Kindersley.
- McGuigan, M. *Tandleman's Beer Blog*.
<http://tandlemanbeerblog.blogspot.com/>
- Daniel Shelton's YouTube interview:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLOhwMW7qjU>