

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Drink Beer, Think Beer: Getting to the Bottom of Every Pint**

**By Holl, J.**

**New York: Basic Books**

**2018, Pp.272, \$26**

**ISBN 978 0 465 09551 3**

Securing an interview with Sam Smith - son of the present boss of the renowned Yorkshire brewery - was a big deal for me. As it would be for any beer writer. Knowing that the Americans hold the brewery in extremely high esteem made it natural that I should try and flog the story to a U.S. publication. This led me to contact John Holl, then editor of *All About Beer* magazine, who immediately agreed to take some words from me. This was definitely one of the easier sells of my career. Sometime after this I found myself travelling to New York City on business and arranged to have a beer with Holl.

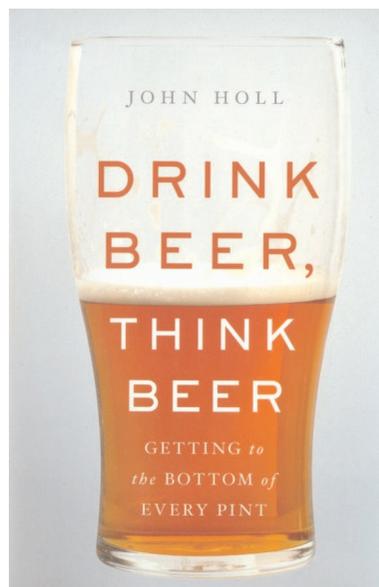
This meeting very nearly didn't happen. For two nights running I had failed to gain entry to craft beer bar Barcade. Even though I was almost 50 years old at the time the doorman and manager would not let me in because I had no proof of I.D. on me. I refused to carry my passport as I thought their request was more than ludicrous. When Holl suggested we meet for a lunchtime beer in this very venue - of all the bars in New York he had to pick this one! - I thought they would refuse me entry having had arguments at the door two nights running. As it was, the doorman was not present that day and so I slipped in without any aggravation. Holl then ran me through the rather odd door rules in the city that I have to admit only made partial sense.

It was at this lunch that he indicated he was mulling over writing a book. It wasn't particularly clear in his mind exactly what angle he would take but what he

wanted to write was something that looked at beer holistically rather than necessarily drilling down - boringly deep - on style, production, glass types, and tasting notes etcetera.

What he ended up with is *Drink Beer, Think Beer* and he does cover these things but his underlying objective has been to convey the joy of drinking beer and what it brings to people rather than purely educational. Consider this passage: 'Over the last 16 years of writing about beer, what I've become obsessed with is the peripherals: the experience not only of the beer itself, but all that goes into its creation, and where it takes us both personally and together.'

His thinking is also that good beer is good beer and that the brewer should be respected regardless of their scale.



No 'big is bad' and 'small is good' stance for Holl. I share this view and so it is rather refreshing to have this open-minded, agnostic stance run through the narrative of the book. He does, however, make reference to some macro beer as 'beer-flavoured beer', which is a term I quite like and might well adopt.

What is overwhelmingly clear is his love for beer. This comes across in abundance and although it is clear his knowledge is deep it is also obvious that he is holding back from showing off and pontificating. This might disappoint some readers who want such details but I found this approach very much added to the book's readability. This is not a publication that aims to be the Encyclopaedia Britannica of Beer (purchase the very fine *Oxford Dictionary of Beer* if you want that). It is much more of a sort of love letter to beer.

He does aim to educate but the text is imbued with anecdotes of his travels with some witty elements intertwined. Thankfully the habit of putting these amusing remarks in brackets in the early part of the book stops quickly and this leads to a more fluid read. I'd argue that he could have included more of his anecdotes. I get the impression he is an unwilling name-dropper but I'd recommend him to drop away with abandon as that's where the real colour comes from.

There are times when he does not hold back and he absolutely savages the Shaker glass and its widespread use in the U.S. In contrast, he acknowledges the impact the branded chalice glass had on the fortunes of Stella Artois in the U.K. and helped it to rid itself of its unwanted 'wife-beater' reputation. Holl has absolutely no time for sexism in beer and he comes across as passionate and principled in the chapter he titles 'Shadows in Beer'.

He also shows some knowledge of the U.K. market and this makes the occasional appearance - notably when talking about CAMRA and he laments the present parlous circumstances surrounding cask beer. 'I don't know if we'll ever see a true resurgence of cask ale here in America. It might just be too quaint for the modern drinker's palate. That said, a soft, slightly malty, and lightly floral-hopped English mild or bitter can be a lovely drinking experience. It's a throwback to simpler times, and a pint of cask ale almost demands that the drinker slow down and savor (sic) the experience. It

rarely gets the marquee treatment of the latest trendy beer, such as an ale hopped with the "it" variety of the moment'. He could almost be talking about the U.K. market here. I certainly concur with his views on the reverence afforded the latest trendy beer at the expense of heritage, long standing quality and cask. Holl expresses his worries about where this might be taking beer - with his view that the vocal minority is out-shouting the wider beer drinking public. Let's all hopefully agree with him on this very point as he expresses heartfelt concern: 'The ones chasing the new, rare, the local - are the tail that is wagging the dog, and they are sucking some of the everyday joy out of the drinking experience by focusing on the liquid and the Instagram shots rather than on beer in the context of the larger world around them.'

His love for the subject is evident right from the off with this very readable book. Consider the dedication: 'For Hannah. I'll explain all of this to you on your 18th birthday at a pub in London. We'll discuss it further at a brewery here in the United States on your 21st.'

Even the most knowledgeable beer nerd will learn things from this book but what I'd suggest is that you mainly buy it for the love.

GLYNN DAVIS

**From Taverns to Gastropubs: food, drink, and  
sociality in England**

**By Lane, C.**

**Oxford: Oxford University Press**

**2018, Pp.229, £30.00**

**ISBN 978 0 19 882618 7**

In her Introduction, Christel Lane states that her purpose is to produce 'a sociological study of the pub that will place it in its social, economic, and, to a lesser degree political-regulatory context. My examination of its historical evolution and character, spanning the period from the second half of the seventeenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century, tries to capture the impact of its constantly changing environment and how it moulds both the pub and its relationship with the other hospitality venues. My focus is the change in the identity of the various hostelries over time, culminating in the most recent transformation: the change towards food-

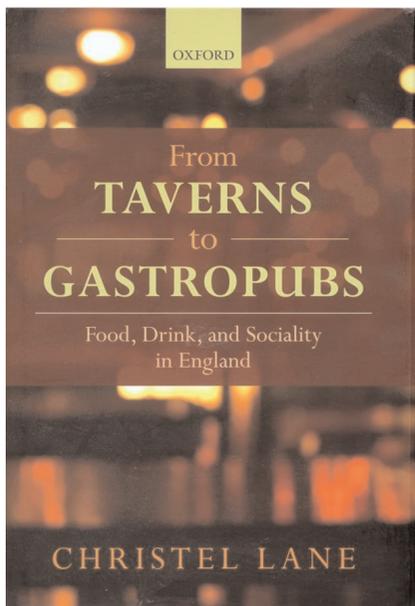
led gastropubs - the most fully elaborated identity in this book' (page 5). Thus gastropubs are analysed comparatively with particular emphasis on food as, for the author, it 'represents a powerful symbolic resource for the expression of patterns of differentiation' (page 6).

The book is divided into two major sections of four paragraphs each. The first section undertakes a historical investigation into the evolution of English drinking establishments using the now well accepted triumvirate of inns, taverns and public houses. As Lane admits, this part of the book is based primarily on secondary sources and so, while being a very good resume of previous research, for those who have read widely around the subject there is little new. What is intriguing is that Lane makes tentative steps towards the historical relationship between taverns and gastropubs. Thus, taverns are 'forerunners of gastropubs [in] that they combined the sale of drink with that of food and prided themselves on the special character of their buildings' (page 26). However, later we read that 'during the twentieth century, taverns had all but disappeared' (page 110) which seems to deny any direct relationship. The water is further muddied by the statements, 'a few pubs combined the functions of an alehouse and a cook-shop, and in this way were fairly basic forerunners of our twentieth and twenty-first

century pub restaurants' (page 81) and that 'the pub retained a strong presence and even began to branch out into the provision of food' (page 117) - the implication being that some pubs were also the precursors of the gastropub.

The second section, 'The rise of the gastropub', attempts to discuss and define the unique aspects of this institution, 'that still relatively small, but growing part of the pub sector where meals are freshly cooked on the premises by a professional chef (often with an haute cuisine background) from produce comparable in quality to that of a good restaurant and mostly locally sourced' (page 143). This is achieved by means of 40 semi-structured interviews with licensees and/or head chefs and results in a list of five factors which characterize the gastropub. According to Lane the most important of these are that areas are reserved for both drinking and eating within the pub. This often leads to 'identity ambivalence', where publicans, 'in trying to create both a restaurant and preserve the pub function, face the dilemma of balancing revenue against the best use of space for both activities while creating an atmosphere that benefits both drinkers and diners' (page 149). The second factor is 'menu plurality' - the food on offer ranges from bar snacks to sophisticated dishes and no one style predominates. Thirdly, gastropubs preserve a pub atmosphere, although this seems to be defined rather narrowly, reflecting a more bourgeois take on pub interiors. Fourthly, service is of a relatively casual nature and, finally, prices are competitive when compared to upmarket restaurants.

What transpires is that the nature of the gastropub is fluid and unresolved, a view which the author appears to support. They have 'a divided organizational identity ... despite much success on the part of landlords/ladies in aggregating the two identities. The institution of the gastropub, now in its twenty-fifth odd year of existence, has not yet developed a settled identity' (page 166). Having such a nebulous nature one may wonder why the gastropub warrants investigation in the first place and even the author appears unsure as to their importance. On the one hand she believes that they have exerted 'only a modest positive influence on the dining pub sector as a whole' (page 197), and on the other that they 'make largely a very positive contribution to the hospitality industry and particularly to its 'dining' dimension' (pages 206-7). Consequently a rather muddled impres-



sion is made. One possible solution to this ambiguity may have been to interview an important resource which is strangely ignored in the book, the customer. What are their perceptions of the gastropub and their owners? Do they distinguish between gastropubs and other similar establishments and, if so, do they care?

Ultimately it seems, to this reader at least, that this is an enquiry searching for a subject. Compared to, say,

Gutzke and Law's *The Roadhouse Comes to Britain*, in many ways a similarly ambiguous subject, it lacks substance. This may be resolved with the passing of time when the gastropub can be analysed from the advantage of historical distance. If this is the case then at least this study will provide valuable resource material for a deeper investigation.

TIM HOLT