

BOOK REVIEWS

Historical Brewing Techniques: The Lost Art of Farmhouse Brewing

Garshol, L.M.

Boulder, CO: Brewers Publications

2020, Pp. xvii + 401, \$24.95

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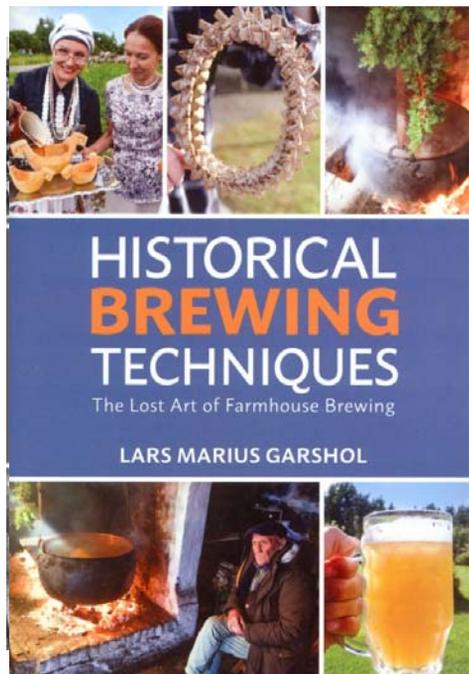
Near the end of his book Lars Marius Garshol writes: ‘... I hope to introduce brewers around the world to the methods, techniques, and mindset of traditional farmhouse brewing. My wish is that people around the world will develop a new respect and understanding for these styles, and perhaps brew and drink them too’ (p.354). If this does not happen it will certainly not be the author’s fault. *Historical Brewing Techniques* goes to great lengths to describe how traditional beers are brewed and the reader cannot but be affected by Garshol’s enthusiasm. However, this is so much more than a recipe book, it also delves into the techniques’ origins, the myths and folklore surrounding them, the lives of those that have and still do carry them out, as well as the author’s encounters with farmhouse brewers.

The book was inspired by his first taste of a Lithuanian beer while on a visit to Vilnius and it made such an impression that he found a local beer guide who took him to a farmhouse brewery in the north of the country. This experience ignited his curiosity even further – the brewing methods he observed were totally new to him and obviously resulted in the beer’s unique taste. He went onto ponder that, if such methods were still being employed in Lithuania, were similar brewing traditions also alive in his native Norway? After nine months of preparation he undertook his first trip to determine the extent of Norwegian farmhouse brewing and what he found inspired led him to go on numerous further journeys across the Nordic and Baltic countries and deep into Russia. Many of these trips are recounted in this book, bringing alive the brewing methods and traditions of many small communities, a lot of which remain isolated to this day.

What he discovered during his research, the use of hot stones, herbs and great ovens (large enough for a grown man

to get inside and take a sauna bath), may strike many as quaint or even bizarre, but as Garshol rightly points out farmhouse brewing was the norm until relatively recently. Therefore, what is being described here was, until the 1800s, an everyday chore, one that most of Europe was happy enough to drop when the price of commercially produced beer came within the reach of ordinary people. The author’s vivid descriptions of brew days on remote farms are a highlight of this book and they are accompanied by his own evocative photographs. *Historical Brewing Techniques* also contains a myriad of striking archival illustrations which often emphasize the extremes undertaken to produce beer such as the dangers of producing malt and the back-breaking tedium of transporting litres of water. It is not surprising to read that ‘one of the biggest recent technological advances in farmhouse brewing was the introduction of the garden hose’ (p.199).

While reading this book you cannot help but think of all those local brewing techniques and traditions lost to us,



some within living memory. It is to the author's great credit that he has undertaken such a vast project to document those still with us. He states that 'my hope is that renewed interest from the major beer nations for these beers will help people in the Nordic and Baltic regions, as well as in Russia, see that these traditions are important and must be preserved. But, again, it is really the locals in the farmhouse brewing regions that have to preserve the tradition by taking it up and keeping it alive. Farmhouse brewing is a *tradition*. It is not communicated through reading books, but through direct learning from an experienced brewmaster already living in the tradition, and direct contact with other brewers in the same tradition as yourself' (p.355).

The author's passion for his subject is almost evangelical, it is certainly infectious, he even suggests that growing awareness of farmhouse brewing techniques may lead to a second brewing revolution following on from that of craft beer. Of course, only time will tell if this happens, but in the meantime what we do have is an engrossing and important book.

A Natural History of Beer

DeSalle, R. and Tattersall, I.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

2019, Pp.xi + 242, \$28.00

ISBN 978-0-300-23367-4

Beer: Taste the Evolution in 50 Styles

Watson, N.

London: Kyle

2020, Pp.208, £15.99

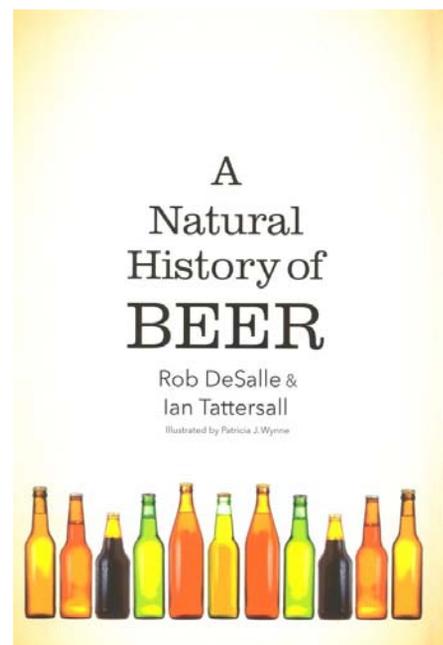
ISBN 978-0-85783-7219

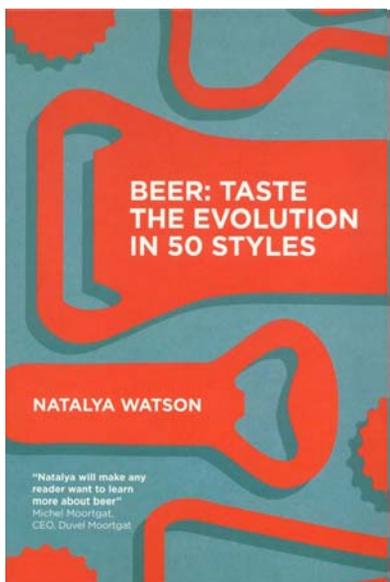
Both *A Natural History of Beer* and *Beer: Taste the Evolution in 50 Styles* offer the reader an introduction to the drink, but in distinctive ways. The first does so by describing '... just how complex the identity of beer is, by situating it first in its historical and cultural contexts, and then in the setting of the natural world from which both its ingredients and the human beings who made it have emerged' (p.x) and the second by offering a 'journey through the history of beer' (p.8) using its four main ingredients to structure the narrative.

DeSalle and Tattersall, with backgrounds in museum curation, have previously published *A Natural History of Wine* and they apply a similar formula to beer. The first section, and the least impressive, is a quick jog through the history of beer and beer drinking cultures. The book takes off in Part Two which investigates beer's components, but before doing so the authors discuss what all four made of, molecules. The

most important of these is DNA and this is discussed in some detail, especially in relation to genetic sequencing, a technique they return to when tackling the ancestry of domesticated barley, yeast and hops. There then follows four chapters on water, barley, yeast and hops, all providing an excellent outline of these basic ingredients. Part Three, 'The Science of Gemütlichkeit', tackles fermentation, how we encounter beer through our senses, and its physiological effects on our body. As in Part Two, quite complex issues are described thoroughly, but in an accessible manner. The final part of the book is a slightly odd mixture of chapters which deal with beer phylogeny – that is the relationship between different beer styles and how they evolved – attempts to recreate ancient types of beers and the future of beer. The real strength of this book lies in its middle two sections, the authors appear more surefooted when discussing the scientific aspects of beer and brewing. Read together with Pete Brown's *Miracle Brew* you will come away with a very good understanding of beer's constituents as well as the process of brewing and our physical and psychological relationship beer.

The four main ingredients are also analysed in *Beer: Taste the Evolution in 50 Styles*, but here they are used to frame a breezy discussion of brewing history, written in a conversational, but not patronising, style. Each section is broken down into one- or two-page descriptions of a particular beer style which is used to illustrate particular points in the history of brewing. For example, the hop section begins with ale before hops, goes on to mention noble and British hops (including the instigation of hop breeding programmes) and ends with the rise of west coast American hops. The format





does mean that certain aspects are missing, for instance the historical importance of Australian, New Zealand and Japanese hops, but this is only a minor quibble as the intention is give an overview, not an exhaustive analysis. Another minor irritation is the somewhat excessive use of illustrations which don't add to the understanding of the topic at hand, but rather tend to break up the text. What is helpful, however, is that each beer style cited has a, more often than not, easily available bottled beer for the reader to try. In doing so the author endeavours to fulfil her aim which 'is to help you taste your way through the evolution of beer styles over time, hopefully giving you an understanding of how different beer styles have influenced each other, what sets each style apart, and how we got to our modern-day boom time for beer' (p.26). This is more than achieved and I would recommend *Beer: Taste the Evolution in 50 Styles* to anyone who wishes to 'journey through the history of beer' – this is an excellent point of departure.

Egypt's Beer: Stella, Identity. And the Modern State **Foda, O.D.**

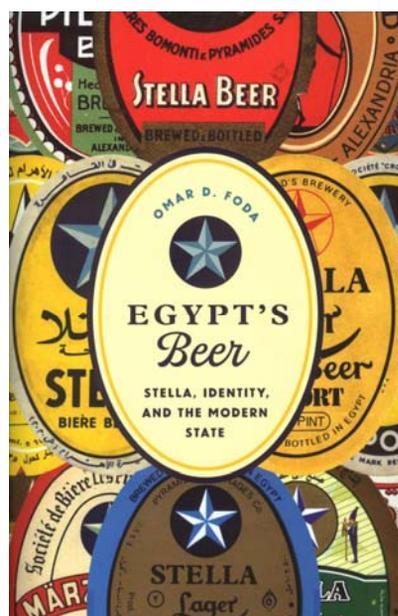
Austin, TX: University Texas Press
2019, Pp.xi + 252, \$34.95
ISBN 978-1-4773-1955-0

You know, without doubt, every group of people needs a distraction. For example, there's arak in Turkey and Lebanon. We wish for beer to become the popular drink in Egypt.

The above quote bookends this excellent work, highlighting its importance to the author. Spoken by Isma'il Hafiz – em-

ployee of the Cairo-based Pyramid Brewery – to Gamal Abdel Nasser – president of the republic of Egypt, it reminds him that at the beginning of the 1960s it was possible to believe that beer, specifically Stella, could become Egypt's drink. And it did become a reality. Consequently, to understand Stella's place in Egyptian history, it should be analysed, not from its present position (one with a declining market and little cultural cachet), but from the viewpoint of those that made and sold Stella, combined with the social, political, economic and technological realities which helped shape its history. Stella did become the beer of Egypt and this book ably describes how it became such a dominant product.

The narrative begins with the establishment of the two breweries which would eventually produce Stella, the Crown Brewery in Alexandria and the Pyramid Brewery. Opened in 1897 and 1898 respectively the companies were founded by a group of Belgian investors based in Brussels. From the outset the breweries leadership contained a mixture of Europeans and members of the Egyptian business elite and to ensure a high-quality product they employed German and Czech brewers. After difficulties in the early years the breweries were provided with a boost thanks to the First World War, with few imports in this period they could consolidate their position in the home market. Another crucial factor was the growth of a particular section of Egyptian society – modern, urban and secular the *effendiyya* used the consumption of alcohol to distinguish themselves from the establishment. Stella, launched as a joint venture by the two breweries in the late 1920s, was targeted at this group. Another important aspect in the rise of Stella was the growing



influence of Heineken during the interwar period. The Dutch company, via a subsidiary, bought into both the Crown and Pyramid breweries and began influencing them by supplying technical help, staff and even a proprietary yeast strain. The 1950s saw a marked increase in the promotion of the Stella brand. In the same period the policies of Gamal Abdel Nasser also helped lift sales as they resulted in workers having a higher proportion of disposable income. However, Nasser's regime became gradually more hostile to the private sector and in the early 1960s both breweries were nationalized and eventually merged into the Al Ahram Brewery. For the next 30 years Stella consolidated its position as the beer of Egypt. However, in the same period, the country was experiencing a significant cultural shift with the growth of Islam which would eventually impact on the way most Egyptians perceived all alcoholic drinks. This and, as significantly, the collapse of the Egyptian economy in the late 1980s, led the government to privatise the brewery in the mid-1990s. It was bought by a New York based investment group who

would eventually sell out to Heineken in 2002. Stella's star has declined. It is still 'the king, but of a much smaller kingdom. Egyptian public culture remains hostile to its presence, and the company that sells it seems resigned to let it fade into the background as it focuses on its non-alcoholic ventures' (p.192).

This fascinating story is well told by Omar Foda, helped by the fact that he is the grandson of the man who ran the brewery during much of its nationalised period. Excellent use is made of sources beyond the brewing industry such as films, songs, advertisements and novels. This is a unique story, but one that highlights how, by concentrating on a single product, one can gain an insight into broad historical realities. It is a book for everyone interested in the history of beer and brewing, both at the national and international level, while simultaneously offering an insight into nineteenth and twentieth century Egyptian history.

TIM HOLT