

A Taster's Guide to
Single Malt Scotch

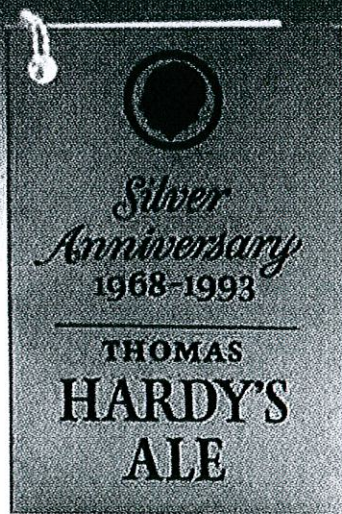
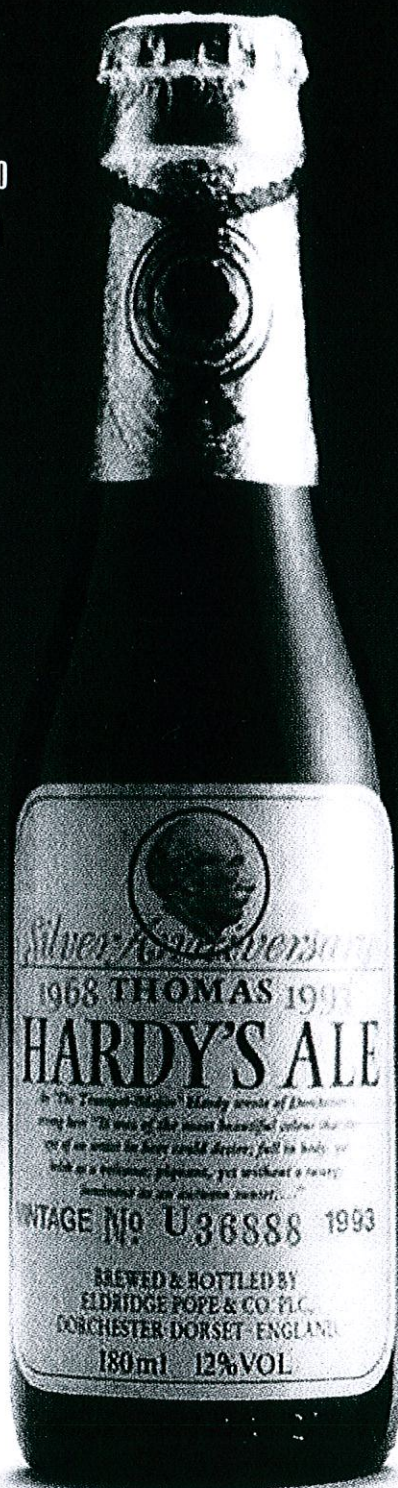
Fundamentals of
Bourbon

Abbey Beers and
Cheeses

Unusual
Beer Styles

A
*Vintage
Tasting
of
Thomas
Hardy's
Ale*

THE FIRST
25
YEARS



*Complete Buyer's Guide Reviews of: American Pale Ales,
Abbey Tripels, Red Ales, Island Single Malts, and more!*



THE MAILBOX

Dear John,

What a pleasure it is to join the masthead of *The Malt Advocate*. As I have told you before, I think that the magazine is highly well-written and increasingly impressive visually, and judging from the many positive comments my mention of the *Advocate* has elicited from others, I would say that I'm not alone in my assessment.

Incidentally, as an interesting aside to John Smith's marvellous history of Scottish whisky, I thought I might add a small piece of malt trivia related to me by David Cox, regional director for Matthew Gloag and Son of Famous Grouse fame. According to Mr. Cox, the reason for the resurrection of single malt whisky as a connoisseur's beverage is linked directly to the phylloxera epidemic that ravaged French vineyards in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Incidentally, the phylloxera plague imposed severe restrictions on the availability of the cognac so loved by the English aristocracy. Never ones to miss an opportunity, the canny Scots thought that this might be a tremendous marketing opportunity if they could create an upscale whisky to replace the missing cognac. They were, of course, quite right and thus, thanks to a parasitic insect imported to France from America, single malt whisky was reborn in Scotland.

Cheers,

Stephen Beaumont

We were very pleased to read your article "Aging Gracefully" in the Malt Advocate.

Your article inspired us to use empty casks in order to age each batch year from year on. Aging batches cost a lot of money, but we are convinced it's worth it because we can check the aging of each batch (the harvest of the cherries is different from one year to another depending

on the weather). Also, now we have cherries from Belgium and Denmark. We have to make decisions which cherries mature and age better.

I'm convinced your article will be interesting and useful to a lot of people! Thanking you once again, we remain,

Annick De Splenter
Riva, NV (Liefmans Brewery)

I just received a copy of your magazine in the mail. What a delight! I was particularly excited to see one of our beers (La Trappe Dubbel) listed in your tasting and rating section. I feel the ratings were fair and descriptive, and certainly amongst the best I have seen. Keep up the good work!

Sincerely Yours,
Lanny Hoff
All Saint's Brands

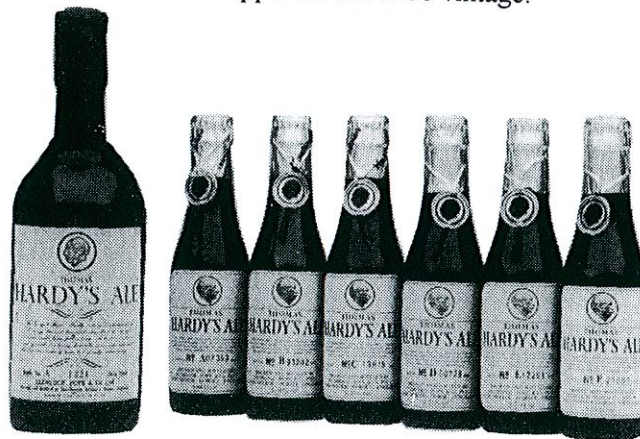
THE VINTAGE ALE

Thomas Hardy's Ale will mature in bottle in the same way as fine red wine. The first brew was in 1968, and since then I have enjoyed tasting the growing complexity and finesse as our brews have matured. Read what famous beer writers say about Thomas Hardy's Ale.

"Voluptuous with profound fruitiness and complex."
Michael Jackson on the 1968 vintage.

"At 6 years old it begins to take on characteristics of greatness."
James Robertson on the 1986 vintage.

"You taste wine that old but this was incredible. Brilliant!"
Barrie Pepper on the 1968 vintage.



We invite you to lay it down, drink it and make your own judgement.

C. J. R. Pope

C.J.R. Pope
Chairman of Eldridge Pope & Co.



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THE FIRST 25 YEARS

enty five years. In the broad scheme of things, that's not much time. After all, we walked along Hadrian's Wall in northern England—a wall built by the Romans two thousand years ago—while singing up a thirst for a Yorkshire bitter. I have seen fragile glass drinking vessels astonishingly intact, several hundred years of age on display at the Hurlimann Brewery in Zurich.

Even in my own little world, twenty five years has encompassed the better part of my life. Since 1968, things I have treasured greatly—loved ones and materialisms—have come and gone. Sadly, they are but warm memories.

It is with great respect that I hold this one of 1968 Thomas Hardy's Ale in my collection. This rare bottle was the centerpiece of an evening consisting of four decades of vintage Thomas Hardy's Ale. It is the most expansive tasting of Thomas Hardy's Ale ever conducted in the United States.

Thomas Hardy: The Writer

To know the beer, one must first understand the writer for which the beer is named. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was a famous English poet and novelist who is known for bridging the gap between Victorian and modern literature. He often waxed eloquently and fondly on local ales.

"The Trumpet Major," Thomas Hardy described a local beer of mythical Wessex as not only well calculated to win the hearts of soldiers blown dry and dusty by

A Vintage Tasting of Thomas Hardy's Ale

by John Hansell

residence in tents on a hilltop, but of any wayfarer whatever in the land." He described the beer as "of the most beautiful colour that the eye of an artist in beer could desire; full in body, yet brisk as a volcano; piquant, yet without twang; luminous as an autumn sunset; free from streakiness of taste; but, finally, rather heady. The masses worshipped it, the minor gentry loved it more than wine, and by the most illustrious country families, it was not despised."

Alfred Pope, the first Chairman of Eldridge Pope Brewery, was a friend of Thomas Hardy. It is believed that a strong beer produced by the brewery was enjoyed by Thomas Hardy and inspired him to write.

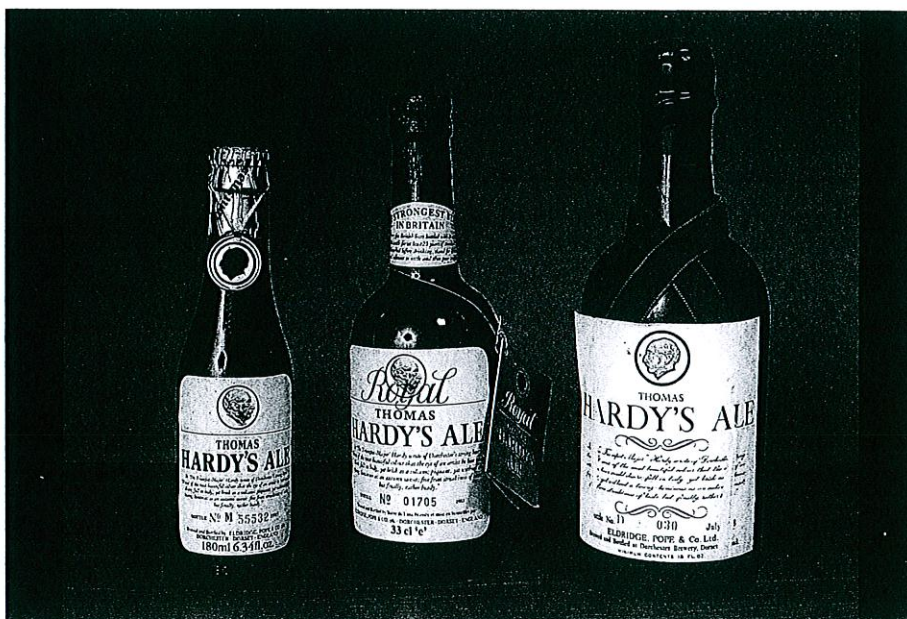
Aging Prowess

While most beers taste best if consumed fresh, a few are well known for their ability to improve in the bottle with age. Chimay Grande Reserve, Courage Imperial Russian Stout, and Gale's Prize Old Ale certainly are members of this elite club. However, the beer mentioned most in this context is Thomas Hardy's Ale. And there is good reason for this.

To begin, Thomas Hardy's Ale is "bottle-conditioned," which means that a final fermentation (and carbonation) occurs by

yeast present in the bottle. Over time, the yeast interacts with the beer, consuming residual sugars and changing the beer's "personality". This is different than most mass produced beers today which are filtered and heat pasteurized. While this may extend the shelf life of a common beer by stabilizing it and destroying any contaminants, it also prevents the beer from improving with age.

Equally important is the fact that Thomas Hardy's Ale is high in alcohol (12.5% ABV), very high in gravity (1125 O.G.), and highly hopped (up to 70 IBUs), which helps to preserve the beer. So, unlike a typical beer which begins to reveal strong off-flavors over time through oxidation, infection or degradation, Thomas Hardy's Ale is so rich and strong that the flavors exhibited by these activities often contribute to Thomas Hardy's complexity if the components are not too dominant. Perhaps this is why Eldridge Pope has been so confident that Thomas Hardy's Ale will keep so well. Reading from the back label of a 1978 vintage, "This beer will improve if kept at 55°F and will last at least 25 years. Do not open before 1988." A confidently bold statement for sure.



The Grand Event

The Purpose: This tasting was conducted to determine the merit of "laying down" vintages of Thomas Hardy's Ale and to identify any particular patterns or trends.

The Setting: The Pink Room of the Farmhouse, in Emmaus, Pennsylvania, a restaurant which is no stranger to beer, with six vintages of Thomas Hardy's Ale on their beer menu. In front of us on a white linen covered table are eight vintages of Thomas Hardy's Ale spanning 25 years, accompanied by plenty of brandy snifters, water glasses, and bread.

The Tasting Panel: Five deserving indi-

viduals. Steve Beaumont (Author of the *Great Canadian Beer Guide* among others), Nick Funnell (Brewmaster of Dock Street Brewery and Restaurant), Bart Springer (President of Chateaux Selections, lecturer and author on wine), George Saxon (President of Phoenix Imports, the importer of Thomas Hardy's Ale), and John Hansell (Author, Publisher of the *Malt Advocate*, and specialist on vintage beers). The panel was chosen for their knowledge and diversity. Our Pourers: Lew Bryson and Mark Johnston, two knowledgeable beer enthusiasts in their own right. (See "Beer Fly on the Wall" side article.)

The Vintages:

1993 "Silver Anniversary", 1990, 1987, 1987 "150th Anniversary" (matured in sherried oak barrels and bottled with a driven cork), 1984, 1982, 1974, and 1968 (the original, matured in oak and corked). All vintages were those of the author's except for the 1968 vintage, graciously donated by George Saxon.

Tasting Notes:

We decided to start with the youngest vintages and work our way chronologically back to the 1968 vintage. Not knowing how most of the vintages would taste, we felt this order would be the most suspenseful (and anxiety filled). The notes below are a summary of the tasters' impressions.

1993 Silver Anniversary

A thoroughbred, full of promise and potential. Most of us had sampled this vintage recently and knew what to expect. Sherry amber colored. Aromas of sweet cake, pit fruit, sugared almonds, and alcohol becoming more fruity in aroma with some breathing. Syrupy malt and fruit sugar flavor, with roasted malt and alcohol undertones. Long, sappy, clinging finish. A beer already at ease being served in lieu of an after dinner cordial.

1990

A balanced beer of great integrity. I've been sampling this vintage for the past four years, and I must say this beer has improved each year, with significant improvements this past year. Fractionally darker than the 1993 vintage in color. Its aroma has dried out, revealing a complexity of fruits and spices (vanilla, smoke, apples, and cinnamon).

In flavor, it is much more balanced and complex than the 1993 vintage, with its malty sweetness part of the overall flavor profile, not the dominating force. There's caramel and treacle up front with evolutions of complex fruit, leading to a dry farewell of coffee, roasted malt, and toffee.

1987

A more versatile and drinkable vintage than the 1990, perhaps sacrificing some character for this. Chestnut amber color. This beer is certainly the most drinkable of the three tasted so far, with no sign of bacterial influence. It is significantly softer and

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more delicate than the prior three. In aroma, it is brandied, with chocolate and caramel laced with mint, fading away to reveal the scent of dried flowers. A pleasant balanced flavor follows revealing notes of complex fruit (figs, dates, currants), treacle, caramel, and chocolate. It finishes soft and gentle.

1987 150th Anniversary

One of the most intriguing and dynamic of the vintages samples. The entire tasting panel's facial expressions were the same prior to sampling this vintage—anxiety and concern over sherried oak aging. Gimmick or benefit, we wondered? To our pleasure, we discovered the wood added complexity and variety.

Chestnut color. The oak influence was quite evident in aroma, which reminded me of a stroll through the forest on a rainy autumn day. Damp wood, cigar tobacco, and caramel malt were the dominant aromas, with dried fruit and prunes evolving over time.

In flavor, there's a fabulous fruit impact (black cherry?) up front that dances on the tongue, followed by caramel, chocolate, and vanilla bean, leading to a dry oak, roasted malt finished.

1984

A vintage clearly of bacterial influence which dominated the flavor profile. One could only wonder how long our good luck would last. Reality struck with the 1984 vintage. Raisins and tart fruit filled the nose of this beer, with a pleasant mustiness in the background. In flavor, it was tart and mouth puckering. It finished tannic, tart, and dry.

1982

An improvement over the '84 vintage, but still with plenty of funk (too much, perhaps). A definite cellar mustiness dominates, with blended aromas of tartness, French roast coffee, caramel and brandy. Sour cherries and plum flood its sharp tart flavor initially, but then dwindle to reveal evolutions of malty sweetness. This vintage is also greatly influenced by its tartness, contributed by bacteria or wild yeast.

1974

"It doesn't taste like a beer at all, and I would be elated if a case were in my cellar,"

offered one taster. The vintages of the early 80s had left me with deep concern for the even older vintages. If a 10 year old Hardy's was so tart, to be nearly undrinkable, what would one twice its age taste like?

Upon inspection of its aroma, I was greatly relieved. Although somewhat musty, its aroma was quite complex, with notes of toasted almonds, dates, chocolate, caramel, and currants. Lightly sharp up front and somewhat vinous, the flavor slowly revealed toasted malt, walnuts and almonds, burnt wood, and a hint of anise. Its finish was delicate and dry. A meditation beer.

1968

We were all convinced that the 1968 vintage had many additional years to mature, if only given the chance. It was the beer we had been waiting for. Bart Springer, well versed in disgorging vintage port bottles, was granted the honor of removing the cork. After careful decanting into our snifters, we quietly, in a church-like fashion, kept to ourselves, until everyone had tasted. Then, almost simultaneously, smiles filled the faces of the tasters, for time had treated this beer well. In the same genre as the 1974, it was like no beer I have ever tasted. Nor do I expect to taste one like this anytime soon.

Its nose was filled with caramelized sugars (one taster suggested *creme brûlée*), with a melange of apples, apricots, black currants, and a hint of port. With some breathing, it revealed notes of chocolate and lightly roasted coffee.

The first thing I noticed while tasting was its embracing silky texture. Creamy butterscotch notes flood the taste buds, laced with subtle complex fruit with evolutions of currants, apricot brandy, and a subtle suggestion of vintage port. Elegant and seamless, this beer was a waltz on the palate, with a gently sweet, lingering finish. Truly sophisticated.

Summary

Our tasting clearly demonstrated the potential for strong, bottle-conditioned beers to continue to improve in the bottle for at least 25 years. However, the risks

are substantial and must be considered.

This tasting, and others in which I have participated, seem to reveal some general rules of thumb regarding Thomas Hardy's Ale. They are:

1. Newly released vintages are generally cloying which dominates the flavor profile. Unfortunately, this is how most beer enthusiasts know Thomas Hardy's Ale. In the proper context, a younger vintage can be an enjoyable beer (in a brandy snifter on a cold winter's night). However, like a vintage port, time is necessary to yield a greater balance and complexity.

2. Four to five years of aging improves Thomas Hardy's Ale with little or no risk of adverse flavor influence. During this additional aging period, the beer dries out, allowing other flavor components to reveal themselves. Like a three day old chili, the flavor components seem to marry together. If any "negative" flavor components are present (e.g. sherry from oxidation), it simply contributes to the complexity of the beer in a positive way.

3. Beers that maintain their integrity beyond 10-15 years of age seem to evolve into a completely new class of drink of a sophisticated nature, quite unlike beer as we know it. There is less hop influence, but greater complexity and elegance.

4. Some vintages are better than others. While the '68, '74, '87 and '90 vintages were splendid, some vintages have proved less successful. The '82 and '84 vintages seem past their prime. I have on other occasions sampled an '83 and an '88 vintage. The '83 also appears to have seen better days (too much bacterial influence?), and the '88 vintage has already begun to show similar signs.

5. As the beers age, whether they have aged well or not, each vintage seems to take on its own personality. It is as if each vintage evolves into a brand new beer, which is why laying down vintage Thomas Hardy's Ale is so exciting.

John Hansell in the creator and publisher of the Malt Advocate. He specializes in vintage beers.

FROM THE BREWER

Producing Thomas Hardy's Ale

By Dan Thomasson

Thomas Hardy's Ale was first sold in 1968 to commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the death of Thomas Hardy. It is based on the ale mentioned in the novel "The Trumpet Major" where it is described so vividly by the author.

The Inspiration for Thomas Hardy's Ale

My predecessor, Ray Botting, describes in a letter how the idea for Thomas Hardy's Ale evolved. It is paraphrased below:

Pub refurbishment in that era were rare events, so it was with some excitement that Eldridge Pope managed a coup of

publicity and along with it the birth of a special beer — Thomas Hardy's Ale.

The event was the opening of the newly refurbished "Trumpet Major" pub by the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Harold MacMillan. His family of publishing Barons had the rights to the works of Thomas Hardy. Above the bar of the pub, lavishly decorated in the style of a Victorian gentlemen's residence, were the words of Thomas Hardy: "It (Dorchester Ale) was of the most beautiful colour that the eye of an artist in beer could desire; full in body, yet brisk as a volcano; piquant, yet without a twang; luminous as an autumn sunset; free from

streakiness of taste; but, finally rather heady."

In swept the Prime Minister and, with him, the polished, nervous cortege. Then he turned to Ray and fired: - "I'm hungry — when do we eat?" No doubt Thomas Hardy himself would have entwined this event into yet another minor human tragedy, but luckily the tale, the ale, and Ray survive despite it!

The birth of this famous name (Hardy's Ale, not Harold) was on Tuesday, November 21, 1967 at 6:20am and, with the gestation period of a true character, was bottled in July 1968.

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The Strength of Thomas Hardy's Ale

The Ale is not as strong as some - "Samichlaus Bier" from Hürliemann, Switzerland claims the Guinness Book of Records for the strongest in the world at 14% alcohol by volume. Our own neighbors in Cornwall have produced a beer at 15% called Doomsday! But Thomas Hardy's Ale at 12% ABV is the only one I know without a Best Before Date!

This beer's final gravity (FG) is greater than some beer's original gravity (OG). A typical beer will ferment from 1045 (OG) to 1010 (FG) to give 4.5% ABV, a strong ale from 1065 to 1015 to give 6.5%, a barley wine 1090 to 1020 to give 9.0% alcohol by volume. Thomas Hardy's Ale has an original gravity of 1125.

In beers of that high specific gravity, the Brewer is faced by immediate problems. A normal wort "run-off" from the mash tuns is, all things being equal, going to end up with a 1050 - 1055 original gravity. This is, historically, the golden OG of world beers. So, how do we get to 1125? How long does it take to ferment? What are the ingredients? Hosts of questions surround this unique beer — let's get some answers.

The Brewing of Thomas Hardy's Ale

Brewing a super strength beer for its own sake is not the aim of the brewer of Thomas Hardy's Ale. It is a beer born out of a deep appreciation of wines, with Eldridge Pope being jealous to guard its reputation as both a Wine Supplier and Brewer of Excellence.

In talking about and consuming beer, there is a strong and growing link with the wine fraternity. Beer descriptors have generally been negatives, indicating process or material faults which brewers aim in their rectification at a better, fresher or more attractive flavors.

Wine connoisseurs are just as concerned about the maturation, flavor development and "aging," including the development of aroma and flavor in the glass.

This latter point is most important and

underscores the whole intention for the full enjoyment of Hardy's Ale. Let the matured beer breathe in the glass. The rewards, nurtured over months and years during the brewing, maturation, and bottle conditioning, are comparable to good wine.

The overriding consideration in achieving a beer of such high alcohol strength is ensuring the best conditions for yeast growth. The sensitivity of a brewing yeast (we do not employ wine yeast) to autolysis at high alcohol levels has to be recognized. We do this essentially by setting out to control each of three stages; primary fermentation, secondary fermentation/maturation and bottle conditioning by introducing fresh yeast in specific amounts at each stage—rather like a relay race!

Wort Production

Wort is derived from all malt grist with the malt chosen for its low color.

Pre-boiled wort will, at normal gravities, give a color of below 10° (EBC). On copper cast, the wort color would rise to 15° or so after an hour's boil. At the gravity of Hardy's Ale, colors are threefold at around 50° giving the final beer a rich, deep amber hue which is so attractive.

Hardy's Ale has to be "parti-gyled" (the same mash being used for several beers). In order to achieve the extremely high extract requirement from the malt, excess malt is used, and the residual extract is used for weaker beers — rather like the "stout" and "porter" practices of the 18th Century!

The wort is run off from two mash tuns to a small 75 Bbl copper, "cutting off" at about 1060 in order to achieve a Copper-In gravity of 1070-80; this should (after boiling) successfully achieve copper "cast" gravities of 1125-1130 to ensure 1125 OG in fermenter. Boiling can take up to 2 1/2 hours to reach its OG depending on sea mists from the English Channel!

The remaining, weaker, extract is used for the production of "bitters" at normal strengths.

Brewing Water or "Liquor"

The water we use for our brewing, called "liquor," is from a deep chalk well. The water is, as you would expect from chalk, of a high temporary hardness, but simple heat and salts treatment reduces carbonate, substituting sulphate and chloride for ale brewing purposes.

Hops

Hops used in the wort boiling process are traditional English varieties. Kent and Worcester Goldings combined with Fuggles and, in recent years, quantities of fine "alpha-aroma" Northdown and Challenger hops are used.

The main task here is to give the barley wine a distinctive bitterness to balance the potential for overwhelming sweetness provided by the malt sugars.

The hops result in some 50-70 units of bitterness and, in my view, take 3-5 years to mellow from their initial, raw bitterness.

Vital to the character of the beer is "dry hopping" — where whole cone Goldings are added in the conditioning tank. During the warm maturation of Hardy's Ale they infuse fine aromas into the developing beer, adding citrus, herbal and floral notes to the mature vintage.

Fermentation

Our job as brewers now is to ensure the yeast is helped in all ways possible during fermentation. A highly fermentable wort can result in too fast a fermentation and stresses to the yeast. Lack of required control can lead to high temperatures, yeast mortality and autolysis. Any rise in pH will potentially let in lactic, or even acetic bacteria which will have a decisive influence on the final flavor. The balance of control is determined by the interplay of complex parameters, the yeast history, its pitching rate, temperature, and wort aeration at the start and during the primary fermentation.

Maturation

This is the middle stage and decisive I

Continued on page 29

Continued from page 20

feel in many ways. The beer, at transfer to 50 barrel glass lined steel tanks, is at 55°F and is maintained at this temperature for at least 3 months.

After primary fermentation, trouble is in store if we were to ask the yeast to survive the final lap as the ABV goes from 9% up to its full 12% at bottling, so fresh yeast and about 6 oz/Barrel of fresh hops are added at the start of maturation. The yeast concentration is very high, both from the new addition and primary fermentation, so the potential for autolysis is always present.

While keeping a small top pressure on the maturation tanks, the secondary fermentation is allowed to proceed, venting excessive carbon dioxide. Potentially harmful bacteria are effectively introduced by the use of natural hops. However, if conditions which are now completely anaerobic, have favored good yeast reproduction and development, then anticipated negative flavors are minimized.

Careful watch is taken on the development of the beer in its final green state. After 3 months, fermentation will be essentially complete. Samples taken from tank will be tested for alcohol content and taste. Generally two or more batches are blended to ensure consistency of ABV.

Bottle Conditioning

Thomas Hardy's Ale is a naturally conditioned beer, retaining all its flavors for full development in bottle. Bottle conditioning is achieved by a small quantity of fresh, clean yeast roused into the beer just before bottling. The air trapped in the neck of the bottle is sufficient to trigger a positive bottle conditioning within a few weeks.

In many ways, the process has been quite a test for us. A balance of many factors has to be achieved and things can still go wrong. Excessive cold or heat during storage can spoil an otherwise acceptable beer. Over-acidity caused by earlier infection can develop as can yeast autolysis which throw the balance toward an

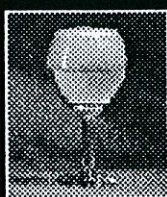
unwelcome harshness.

For such a robust beer, each element adds to its character, interest and opinion so evident in the reactions of Beer (and Wine) Writers.

Dan Thomasson is the Master Brewer at the Eldridge Pope brewery, producers of Thomas Hardy's Ale.



The Great Beers of Belgium



Michael Jackson

Michael Jackson's complete guide to the unique culture that is Belgian beer

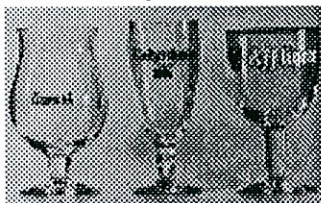
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THOMAS HARDY'S ALE - THE VINTAGES

In 26 years, there is plenty to celebrate or commemorate. Thomas Hardy's Ale has been doing that for appropriate occasions since its inception:

1968 The original.

Matured in oak and corked in special pint and half pint bottles - a classic presentation though the beer is difficult, if not impossible, to find. Launched to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the death of Thomas Hardy, who was a contemporary and acquaintance of Alfred Pope, the Brewery founder.

1983 Royal Thomas Hardy's Ale

Brewed to celebrate the completion of the Centenary development at Dorchester - the new brewhouse opened by H.R.H. Duke of Kent in 1982.

1987 150th Anniversary

Again matured in oak sherry casks and filled into driven corked bottles with 'port' capsules. Celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Dorchester brewing business.

1993 Silver Anniversary

The first 25 years - a celebration in itself of Thomas Hardy's Ale.

A fitting tribute to the beer was the award of Champion Bottle Conditioned Beer of Britain at The Great British Beer Festival.

Beer Fly on the Wall



By Lew Bryson

The *Malt Advocate's* vertical tasting of Thomas Hardy's Ale was more than a simple beer tasting; it was a dramatic event. I was lucky enough to be there, by dint of guessing that John would want some experienced (and properly reverent!) beerfolk to serve the tasting panel. Here's what the experience was like . . .

I'm there, waiter-style, white shirt and red bowtie, in the corner with Mark Johnston. We're pouring by the numbers, eyeballing each glass jealously, and breathing deeply as the rich vapors fill our corner of the room. That's good for them, now a wee dram for us, we murmur, and carefully tease the last clear drop over the swirling yeast bed.

"A little more of the '90, Lew?"

"Don't mind if I do, Mark. Potent stuff, isn't it? My God, just the smell of it . . ."

Mark and I are pouring for the Thomas Hardy tasting, and we are lucky men. Creak off the caps (gently, don't bend them), pull the corks splogkk out of the necks, and the smell of rich malty ale-fruit fills the air. Pour the light mahogany liquid into the waiting snifters, carefully even portions measured from child-sized bottles.

"How about that casked '87, Mark?"

"It's quite different, rich, a little caramelly."

The lesser vintages sit with us, but the tasters have reserved the big bottle of '68

to the center of their table. It is an honored guest, bedecked with its seal and red velvet ribbon. We look towards it, longing, curious, hopeful and concerned. Our concern deepens as we move back through the years, into the early 80s. Sourness puckers faces around the room.

"Belgian?"

"Infected?"

[Together:] "Needs a good soft cheese to go with it!" [Subdued, golf course laughter at the tasting panel in-joke]

Bart Springer is our hero: he is concerned that we get a chance to taste all the vintages. Some of the 7 ounce bottles yield us only yeasty dregs, so his largesse is greatly appreciated. Naturally, John is our benevolent lord and master for having brought us to this table, this lifetime peak of beer: the '68 Thomas Hardy's.

"What do you think, Mark? Will it be okay?"

"There's a lot of headspace there, I don't know . . ."

The drama intensifies as we experience the '74. It is markedly better than the vintages of the early 80s. Eyes look towards the '68 with a new, hopeful appraisal. Perhaps there was a lapse in the Thatcher years, why not blame her for one more thing . . .

"You want to open it?"

"I don't wanna open it."

"Let's get Bart! Let the wine guy do it!"

Bart steps up to the bottle and slips the twin paddled Ah-so [?] opener down along the surprisingly firm cork. Someone has kept this bottle well: thanks, George! He makes some small, tentative moves, a tactile reconnaissance, then pulls the cork from the neck in one swift movement; a small chunk flies off to the side. I'd almost call it a yank.

"You pour, Mark, I'll eyeball."

"Plenty to go around, eh?"

The ale pours smoothly, Mark's steady hands keep the bed quiescent. A complex aroma fills the air and easily paints smiles on the faces of the gathered faithful. The brewers' child was true, and their skill endured. We are all shaken to silence by this 26 year-old antique. The sweetness that suggests the ability of the ale to have continued aging is satisfying, the complexity that tells of the long trip already made is humbling.

"Seconds, gentlefolk?"

The most welcome question of the night! We savor the seconds even longer, knowing that the chances are overwhelmingly against ever tasting such a beer again. Finally we adjourn to the bar for a sip of a new challenger, just starting its own long journey: the Samuel Adams Triple Bock. Care to make a date for 2019?

Lew Bryson is gratified by the number of former Coors Lite drinkers helped to a new self respect.



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In our next issue...

We begin our new column pairing beer and food. Lucy Saunders, noted food and spirits writer, will focus on a specific beer style each issue. Also, we'll see how blended scotch is produced, look at organic beers, and explore the history of brewing. We'll take a look at merchant single cask single malts and learn about yeast's influence on beer.