

It's not all beer and skittles

A foaming pint in your local may quench your thirst, but with some multinational breweries under fire for their practices, does your favourite beer also slake the demands of your conscience? **Victoria Lambert** reports

For such a simple pleasure that's enjoyed daily by millions, the ethical issues surrounding the production and sale of beer are surprisingly complex.

At its most extreme, certain brands have been associated with a trade in Cambodia, China and other Asian countries that is both tragic and frustrating. 'Beer girls' are employed by many of the major international and local breweries to exclusively sell their brand via the restaurants and bars of their village or town. The women wear branded clothing and are paid either a monthly wage or a commission, generally based on them selling a case (eight litres) a night.

SELLING BOTTLES AND BODIES

Unfortunately, the trade has become associated with alcoholism, poverty and sex for money. The average wage is about US\$55–65 a month – half the amount needed as a 'living' wage. The beer sellers often drink their own stocks, and many are forced to sell sex after propositions from local and tourist customers. By 2003, an estimated 20 per cent were HIV positive, and, unable to afford the antiretroviral drugs they need, many would die from AIDS within two years. They are quickly replaced with new recruits from the countryside, who are given little or no training before starting this risky work.

A campaign led by Ian Lubek, a psychology professor at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, and a visiting professorial fellow at the Australian National Centre in HIV Social Research at the University of New South Wales,

has urged companies such as Heineken, Tiger, Carlsberg, Guinness and the Anheuser-Busch InBev brands (such as Budweiser) to fulfil their responsibilities to their beer sellers. In an April 2008 report, he suggested that companies should pay their beer sellers a 'living wage', provide free antiretroviral drugs for HIV-positive workers, improve health education before employment, provide contracts transparently and end all workplace drinking.

Lubek has several tough questions for the companies: 'Are shareholders and executives willing to pay, at least, "living" wages, or permit beer sellers to receive a commission on their increasing sales volumes? Will they accept a small decline in sales if beer sellers stopped drinking on the job? Can the educational programmes be strengthened and made pre-emptive, as they will not prevent AIDS and alcohol abuse if administered after the beer seller has started working and drinking?'

Lubek's campaign is being followed by some British students, who paste 'Killer Beers?' stickers on the bottles of 28 beers behaving badly, including Bass Ale and Guinness (brewed for the Asian market under licence to a Heineken partner). But the professor believes there is still a long campaign to be fought before companies will accept that they have a fuller responsibility towards the women involved; some still categorise them as part of a promotional budget rather than as beer-selling staff who produce half their total sales, and whose health, safety and economic security all need to be respected.



A typical bar in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where young local women are employed as 'beer girls' to promote various beer brands. They often top up their paltry wages by selling sex, putting them at risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections

DRINK BRITISH

Closer to home, the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) is looking at how beer is sold, with the aim of encouraging pubs to stock at least one local brew. CAMRA's Jon Howard says that the LocAle campaign shows consideration for the local economy and aims to reduce the number of 'beer miles' that your pint travels by persuading the pubs to stock at least one beer produced within a 30-mile (48-kilometre) radius. The scheme has now grown to 50 local branches of CAMRA, which each cover at least 30 pubs, so the potential for encouraging the public to think global but drink local is huge.

Some breweries are already getting their teeth into issues such as climate change: last April, Adnams launched East Green, Britain's first carbon-neutral beer. The company has set up a new eco-friendly brewery in Southwold, Suffolk, that recycles steam created

TIM WHITE/ALAMY

during the brewing process, using it to heat 90 per cent of the following brew. The beer is made from locally grown barley and aphid-resistant hops to cut the use of pesticides, and Adnams makes a payment of 0.004p per bottle to environmental organisation Climate Care to offset the small amount of CO₂ emitted during production.

Greenpeace has highlighted Scottish & Newcastle's Royal Brewery, in Moss Side, Manchester (the home of Foster's, the second-biggest-selling lager in the UK) as a good example of business setting the environmental agenda. The company is installing biomass plants in Manchester and at its Tadcaster site that will burn spent grain and woodchips to generate both steam and electricity, so reducing its dependence on fossil fuels. The sites will also burn the biogas (methane) produced by the on-site effluent treatment plant to create

electricity. These biogas and biomass plants will significantly reduce the sites' carbon footprints.

SMALL BEER, BIG IDEAS

But it isn't just the big breweries that are achieving results. The Black Isle Brewery near Inverness is demonstrating how green an industry brewing can be with a little forethought.

'People think that beer is a natural product,' says the Black Isle Brewery's Roy Brown. 'They don't always associate it with pesticides.' However, the brewery produces quality organic beers packaged in recycled materials – it won first place in the Beer and Cider category of the 2008 Soil Association Organic Food Awards with its Organic Yellowhammer; the barley and hops used are grown on organic farms, without artificial fertilisers or herbicides.

It's worth checking out beers that are certified as organic. According to the Soil Association's Clio Turton, 'the average conventional farmer is estimated to spray hops up to 14 times each year with an average of 15 pesticide products'.

Turton also explains that before a beer can be certified, justification has to be provided for the use of burtonisation. 'This is a process whereby skilled brewers modify the mineral content of their water,' she says. 'It involves the addition of mineral salts such as calcium sulphate [gypsum], calcium chloride and calcium carbonate [chalk] to create a water appropriate to the style of beer being brewed.'

Another process is fining – clearing material such as yeast from the final liquid – which can be a problem for vegetarians and vegans. Cask-conditioned ales need to undergo this process, but it invariably involves, according to the Vegetarian Society, the addition of isinglass – which is derived from the swim bladders of fish such as sturgeon. Not all beer will have been treated this way: keg beers and lagers are normally pasteurised and passed through chill filters, as are canned and some bottled beers.

Although, for the vast majority of beer drinkers, taste is going to determine drinking habits, those of us who wish to add an ethical, environmental element to our choice of brew are increasingly being given froth for thought. **G**

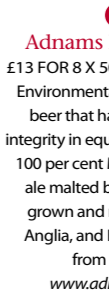


THE PERFECT PINT

Five ethical beers to try



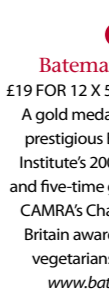
1
Black Isle Brewery Organic Yellowhammer
£31.40 FOR 12 X 500ML;
4% ABV
Winner of the Best Beer 2008 Organic Food Award. A straw-coloured bitter, brewed with Cascade hops, which add a flinty, grapefruit aroma.
www.blackislebrewery.com



2
Adnams East Green
£13 FOR 8 X 500ML; 4.3% ABV
Environmentally responsible beer that has flavour and integrity in equal balance, using 100 per cent Maris Otter pale ale malted barley, which is grown and malted in East Anglia, and Boadicea hops from Suffolk.
www.adnams.co.uk



3
St Peter's Brewery G-Free
£29.50 FOR 12 X 500ML;
4.2% ABV
A clean, crisp, gluten-free ale with a pilsner-style finish and aromas of citrus and mandarin from Amarillo hops.
www.stpetersbrewery.co.uk



4
Batemans XXXB
£19 FOR 12 X 500ML; 4.8% ABV
A gold medal winner in the prestigious British Bottlers' Institute's 2006 competition and five-time gold medallist in CAMRA's Champion Beer of Britain awards. Suitable for vegetarians and vegans.
www.bateman.co.uk



5
DIY Beer London Bitter BruBox starter kit
£22.48; MAKES TEN LITRES
Home brewing is the ultimate solution to beer miles.
www.diybeer.co.uk