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, do 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 brands 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.

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?’

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 Belgian 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 of whom 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.

During the brewing process, using it to heat 90 per cent of the following brew. The beer is made from locally grown barley and sulphur-free hops to cut the use of pesticides, and Adnams makes a payment of 0.004p per bottle to environmental organisations. "This is a process whereby skilled brewers can ensure minimal contamination of their water," she says. "It involves the addition of mineral salts such as calcium chloride and calcium carbonate to create a water appropriate to the style of beer being brewed." Another process is fining – clearing the beer of any sediment.

Among the beers behaving badly are Bass, Heineken, Carlsberg, Guiness and the Anheuser-Busch InBev brands (such as Budweiser) to fulfill 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.

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The perfect pint

Five ethical beers to try

1. Black Iddon Brewery Organic Yellowhammer

2. Adnams East Green

3. St Peter’s Brewery G-Free

4. Black Isle Brewery

5. DIY Beer London Bitter

For more information on ethical beers, see www.lubek.ch

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