

EVOLUTION OF CRAFT BEER CULTURES

 ANDERS KISSMEYER, TECHNICAL EDITOR, E-MAIL: ANDERS@KISSMEYER.DK

Maybe it has to do with age, maybe it has to do with having spent several decades within one and the same industry and field of expertise, maybe it has to do with an irrepressible personal curiosity about the general state of affairs of everything. Or maybe it has to do with my unstoppable need to voice my opinions, hoping to stir up a debate that will hopefully make us all a bit wiser and a bit better equipped to tackle the future and the challenges. Whatever the reason is – and it is probably a mix of all of the above – I cannot help wondering about where the craft beer success comes from. It can hardly be a coincidence that craft beer has manifested itself all over the Western and westernized world and keeps growing everywhere now for the third consecutive decade (and a bit longer if we honour the birthplace of the whole movement, namely the American west coast). I think that the last of the sceptics who saw craft beer as a temporary fashionable fad that would die out as quickly as it appeared are either dead and gone or have changed their minds by now! Just look at the reactions from the big brewers around the globe – they have reached the same conclusion and are now all, each in their own way, trying to tackle the challenge to their old, traditional lager beer brands.



The fact that we're seeing exactly the same consumer behaviour within beer as we see within all other product categories – food, wine, coffee, clothing, vacations, cars, etc., etc. – more than hints at some fundamental reasons. The present-day

consumer is individualized, critical, focused on health, on sustainability and – perhaps more than anything - on acting local. The consumer wants to know where, how and by whom the products they buy are made, and he/she does not only buy products – the story behind it is equally important. This has changed dramatically during the past 5 decades, and as the sociological reasons and factors behind this are as many and complicated as they are interesting, I will save my analysis and

thoughts on the details of the evolution of the beer consumer over the past half a century for a later editorial. Here I will focus on the craft brewing industry itself and how it has developed.

Although I'm neither a sociologist nor a philosopher, I still don't think that I'm on any kind of thin ice when I claim that craft beer is a sociological phenomenon, and, as such, it is a natural and inevitable consequence of the sociological development of our societies over the past 4 – 5 decades. With the fear of repeating myself from previous editorials, I still feel that it is necessary to somehow circle in what craft beer is before jumping into the analysis of its development. And yes, I have previously argued quite strongly that any rigid, general definitions of craft beer and craft brewing are both impossible as well as irrelevant to lay down. As the lines between craft beer and 'industrial beer' rapidly become more and more blurred, we're basically in a situation where we all have our own definition of what craft is, regardless of whether we are

conscious about this or not. Thus, in order to understand my analysis and opinions, the ‘circling in’ has to be a clarification of what my personal definition of craft beer is. Here are some important bullet points in that regard:

- Craft beer is not, in essence, about new beer styles, tons of hops or the latest fad – it’s about who we are as human beings and how we wish to be perceived.
- The craft brewing ethos is an idealistic belief about doing things better, being authentic and being directly and honestly in tune with our consumers.
- Craft brewing is about genuinely being part of and supporting the local community – events, charities, socio-economic activities, etc.
- Craft beer is about replacing expensive hardware with passion and dedication – machines with real people.
- Because craft beer is innovative, local, sustainable and authentic, it is therefore trendy, sexy and contemporary.
- Craft beer and brewing is quite simply about acting in accordance with where the consumers – and thereby we ourselves - are going.

It is my strong conviction that the ‘soul’ of what we call craft beer in essence has nothing to do with the size of a brewery’s annual production, what other products the company might produce, what the ownership structure of this company is, or what types of raw materials it brews with. So, in tune with this, these elements are not included in the bullet points above. However, it is a historical fact that the pioneers in the craft beer business everywhere have been small and independent breweries, to a large extent defining and positioning themselves in opposition to the big (international) brewing conglomerates and their beer products. Thus, if the driving forces behind the development of craft beer cultures are to be understood, we have to look at this segment of our industry.

Having watched the craft beer scenes develop in both the US (I pride myself with noticing and taking a personal interest in the development ‘over there’ at a very early stage), in our own region and in Europe in general, I find that there seems to be a very universal pattern. What I initially found fascinating, but upon further thinking about it only found to be very logical and self-evident, is that this pattern is entirely similar to the evolution of a human being! To some degree, you might ask how it could be different, and the pattern looks like this:

- **Step 1:** The pioneers, i.e. the first craft breweries in a craft beer culture, are inexperienced newcomers, often self-taught previous homebrewers, so the focus is on learning: brewing copies of their own favourite existing beer styles from other craft beer markets. In the ‘human being analogy’, this corresponds to infancy – the newborn child is a ‘blank slate’ and relies entirely on copying the parents and other older individuals, gradually learning to walk, speak, eat and perform all sorts of other tasks.
- **Step 2:** The brewers have learned the craft, so cautious experimentation begins: extensions and interpretations of existing styles, staying within a known framework, but adding smaller or larger personal touches/interpretations to it. In the ‘human being analogy’, this corresponds to adolescence – in the formative teenage years, human beings have learned all the basic tasks and start to liberate themselves by consciously deciding which parts of this ‘framework’ they are happy with, which ones they wish to shape to their own liking and finally which elements they want to discard entirely. In this regard, the breweries as well as the humans form their personality/individuality, allowing themselves as well as the world around them to tell them apart from all the others.
- **Step 3:** Fully experienced and confident brewers, who know their breweries, their raw materials and processes inside out to the extent that brewing becomes almost intuitive. Then the need appears – first amongst the more talented and creative brewers, but gradually among more and more others – to develop new, original beer styles rooted in their own culture and terroir, thus bringing them in tune with their own souls. This is the ultimate way of expressing their true nature and applying all the skills they have acquired through the previous phases and continuously ‘pushing the envelope’ by using new raw materials and applying new techniques. Both in order to create more unique and innovative beers, but also following the natural human urge to challenge oneself all the time – can this be done, and can I do it? The ‘human being analogy’ is obvious: This phase corresponds to adulthood where we as individuals choose and evolve our way of life, within the boundaries of the physical possibilities, exploiting all the learning from the previous phases, as well as taking on-board the inspiration we gather from all over.

→

In practice, this is now reflected by the huge interest in the US in farmhouse brewing – in general, this is the common term for ‘brewing with a sense of place’ (as described in Stan Hieronymus’ new book ‘Brewing Local: American Grown Beer’ from which you can find an excerpt elsewhere in this issue of the SBR). We also see an explosion in the number of US craft maltings and new hop farms, also in areas of the US not previously established as hop growing areas. In Italy, they have moved at incredible speed – some would say almost skipping them through phases one and two in experimenting heavily with typical local ingredients in their brewing. In our own ‘neck of the woods’, we have seen the fast and wide proliferation of the New Nordic Beer movement, which is the perfect example of a ‘Step 3’ evolution. In this way, I have also – discreetly, of course – managed to argue that the New Nordic Beer movement is evolutionarily inevitable, which I fundamentally believe that it is.

Of course there are huge differences in how quickly the breweries as a whole in a given craft beer culture move through the evolutionary phases, as there are obviously huge differences between how different breweries within a given craft scene evolve. It is extremely tempting in this respect to continue the ‘human being analogy’. Some persons never move out of phase two – even out of Phase 1 in extreme cases – in their personal development. How individuals and breweries develop is not only a consequence of the evolution of the culture they are part of, but will always also be a function of their ‘genetic heritage’. For breweries, I see the ‘genetics’ as the pool of human talent, intelligence and curiosity they encompass. But ‘the environment’ is also extremely important on a smaller level than the overall culture. How you as brewery will develop is obviously strongly influenced by whether you’re a small and isolated brewpub in a tourist destination or whether you’re a production brewery in an urban – or even metropolitan – location. The necessary, fascinating and diverse interplay with the consumers is defining in how a brewery develops, and it is clearly like night and day in those two extremes.

The cases of Germany and Italy are interesting in this respect, because the ‘environments’ in the two countries are extremely different. In Germany, the consumers – supported by the established brewing industry – believe that the existing supply of German beers represent the highest possible degree of perfection. They have been drinking tons of it for centuries, and the German beer culture is one of the most essential parts of German national identity. Perhaps not the ideal environment for a craft beer revolution, and consequently the one that is

actually going on right now is developing very, very slowly and must be said – with a few notable exceptions - to still be in ‘Phase 1’.

Italy, on the other hand, is not historically a beer nation. However, it is one of the most advanced ‘food and drink’ cultures in the world with a general openness to variety and a strong affinity for locally produced and influenced food and beverage products. So, a much more welcoming environment for a craft beer movement with a consumer attitude that intrinsically is more open to craft beers with an Italian twist than to traditional beer styles that the Italians had never previously been exposed to or heard of... So that is, in my humble opinion, the main explanation for the fact that the Italian craft beer industry – and in this context ‘Italy’ is very much to be interpreted as the richer, northern part of the country – very quickly, to a large extent, jumped straight into the ‘Phase 3’. Perhaps very much due to the pioneer and ‘lighthouse’ amongst Italian craft brewers, Birra Baladin, founded and still proudly led by the charismatic Teo Musso, who started operations back in 1986 with a very distinct Italian/Piemontese approach to beers and brewing. And, in the northern part of Italy today, both the number of breweries and the sales of craft beer are at very high levels.

Please remember that we at the SBR very strongly encourage you to comment on anything you wish to comment on in the magazine, but obviously particularly to the editorial. Please forward your comments to anders@kissmeyer.dk.

We at the SBR hereby want to wish all our authors, contributors, advertisers and readers a very merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. We look forward to an interesting and eventful 2017 – at the SBR and everywhere else in the Nordic and Baltic brewing industries and surroundings. ☺

Anders Kissmeyer

Technical Editor, Scandinavian Brewer’s Review



NORDIC BY NATURE

Across the globe, flavour trends are moving fiercely and fast. Food and beverage producers of all shapes and sizes are striving to keep up with picky international palates in order to gain that rare competitive edge.

At Einar Willumsen, our mission is to help our customers develop and market exciting and innovative new taste experiences for consumers. With insight from the Nordic food tradition and oversight to the world, we transform today's international trends into tomorrow's most popular local food products.

Learn more at ewflavours.com

