

Roger Protz

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Full steam ahead at Meantime

Passion for authentic cask ale is driving expansion of Alastair Hook's iconic empire

Alastair Hook is a brewer with a mission. He believes there's a thirst for better beer in Britain and his task in life is to provide it. He's just opened a new, expanded Meantime Brewery near the O₂ in south London that replaces his original site in Greenwich.

Not content with that, he's also restored a fascinating piece of London brewing history with a micro-plant in the Old Royal Naval College next to the Cutty Sark and alongside the Thames.

The main brewery is jaw-dropping. I've known Hook for many years, since he opened a craft brewery and restaurant in Ashford, Kent, in the '80s, where he made true German-style lager – "ahead of my time," he freely admits. From there he built and brewed at two Oliver Peyton Mash restaurants in Manchester and London and was involved in the launch of the Freedom lager brewery in Putney.

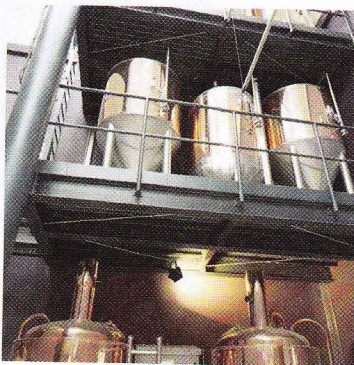
With Meantime he has achieved a lifetime's ambition to brew both British and European beers true to style. He's won many plaudits for his India Pale Ale and London Porter but he's also invigorated the London bar and restaurant scene with fruit beers, wheat beers and such German styles as Helles and Kölsch.

He outgrew the first Meantime Brewery and has moved to the new site where he can produce 25,000 barrels a year but has room to grow to 100,000 barrels. The plant is German-built and based on the flexible system of mash mixer, lauter tun [fil-

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Refreshing chat: London mayor Boris Johnson chats to brewer Alastair Hook as he officially opens the Greenwich-based Meantime Brewery



New kit: copper vessels



German-built: copper vats

tration vessel] and hop kettle. The kit allows him to produce ale and lager and he proves the point with a sample of his new 4.6% London Lager.

Hook trained at Heriot-Watt School of Brewing & Distilling in Edinburgh and the renowned Weihenstephan brewing school near Munich, so he knows how to make a proper lager. He astonishes German friends by using the finest Maris Otter malting barley from Norfolk and Kentish Fuggles and Goldings hops. Germans think you can only brew true lager with German ingredients; Hook not only proves them wrong but is looking for aromas and flavours that will appeal to the British palate.

"There are no easy stepping stones from Carling to cask beer," he says. "I want to provide them." His lager is cold-conditioned for seven weeks and has the rich toasted malt and spicy hop character you expect from

a true lager – but with a British twist. He hopes drinkers who appreciate this will move on to his London Pale Ale (4.7%); he adds gypsum to the brewing water to produce an authentic Burton-on-Trent sulphury character allied to an intense bitterness from English and American hops. Then there's his 7.5% IPA, with 75 units of bitterness – more than twice the usual level for pale ale. After that, there are no known stepping stones to take you back to Carling.

Dwarfed by huge fermenting and conditioning tanks in the new brewery, we downsized by moving to Hook's second new brewing venture, a six-barrel microplant in the Old Royal Naval College. Here, in the splendour of Sir Christopher Wren's buildings – one of the great architectural delights of

the civilised world and a Unesco World Heritage Site – Hook has restored an old brewing tradition.

In 1694 the monarchy founded a royal hospital for seamen within the naval college. Porter was brewed there to comfort sick and dying sailors and Hook has restored the tradition with his Hospital Porter (8%). This amazing beer is brewed with nine malts and English hops and, in the true fashion of early 18th-century porters, it's a blend of old and young beers. The old beer is matured in peated whisky casks for two years and the finished beer has a complex character of peat, roasted grain, chocolate, coffee and liquorice and a lactic note that evokes memories of Mackeson milk stout.

There's also a hint of seaweed or phenol, which comes from whisky casks obtained from the Bruichladdich distillery on the Scottish island of Islay. Casks from the same source are used to mature Imperial Russian Stout, also 8%, a straight, unblended strong porter with more pronounced phenolic/seaweed character.

Hook wants to build yet more stepping stones, this time matching beer and food.

The naval college has a spacious restaurant with a fine vaulted ceiling and such delights on the menu as Irish rock oysters with Meantime London Porter; Cheddar & leek tart, poached hen's egg & Hollandaise sauce with Meantime Scotch; roast monkfish tail, baby spinach, anna potatoes, thyme & shallot butter sauce with Meantime Abbey ale chocolate fondant, Jersey clotted cream ice cream, chocolate malt crunch with Hospital Porter; and bitter chocolate and cep truffle with Imperial Russian Stout.

Restoration of the naval college brewery and restaurant cost £200,000, while the main new brewery has required £2m. Most shareholders are Hook's family and friends, with substantial input from two brewing industry big hitters.

The restaurant walls are decorated with a timeline of brewing in London from the late 17th century. "We're resurrecting London's brewing past," Hook says.

With due solemnity, I raise a glass of Hospital Porter to Meantime's vibrant present and future.