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Brewing up a storm

WORDS | LEE CHESHIRE

TANKED UP:
The Old Brewery has a small onsite microbrewery where they make special experimental beers

MEANTIME BREWERY, IN LONDON'S HISTORIC GREENWICH, HAS CREATED AN EXPERIMENTAL RESTAURANT-BAR, A BEER CONNOISSEUR'S HEAVEN, WITH MODERN BRITISH CUISINE COMPLEMENTING ITS EXOTIC HANDCRAFTED BEERS

"I'M SICK OF LISTENING TO PEOPLE SAY how marvellous wine is with food. It's the same for anything. Soft drinks are good with food! You've just got to match the flavours. And beer is actually a lot more versatile."

I'm sitting in a sunny beer garden by the River Thames and Alastair Hook, master-brewer at London's Meantime Brewery, is holding forth on the philosophy that led to the creation of his new bar/restaurant, the Old Brewery. Each of the modern British dishes – including oysters, fried pigs' ears and slow-cooked mutton – is specifically designed to complement one of the handcrafted beers and often include beer among the ingredients. (Both are reasonably priced with mains around £15 and pints around £3.50).

"You can't match a wine with chocolate," he continues. "But you can match a beer made from a roasted barley, with its rich malt character." Hook goes on to describe the endless variety of hops, barleys and yeasts, the hundreds of methods of production, that give each brew its own particular personality. With all this expertise going into its production, it's hard to disagree with his contention that beer is as worthy of connoisseurship as wine.

And more and more people are coming around to his way of thinking. Within only 10 years, Meantime has become London's second-biggest brewer. They now provide beer to many of the city's top eateries, including Terence Conran's British-themed cafe Albion, offal-pioneers St John, local favourite Chez Bruce, and



'WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE THE BEER LIST, SIR?'

Meantime, ran by Alastair Hook (above), is one of the small breweries reviving traditional styles of beer...

India Pale Ale

Appearance: Light, copper-coloured

Taste: Rich fruit and spices

History: Invented in London in the 18th century, this beer was made extra-alcoholic in order to survive the journey to India.

Food matches: British classics like roast beef or curry

Porter

Appearance: Chocolate

Taste: Dry, caramel and toffee

History: A thick, fortifying beer that is said to have been drunk by the porters in London's markets to sustain them through the night.

Food matches: Red meat and rich cheeses

Wheat beer

Appearance: Golden, cloudy

Tastes: Fruity and bright

History: Traditional style in Belgium and Germany, where strict laws govern its brewing.

Food matches: Seafood

SHELL OUT:

The menu includes British classics such as oysters served with Porter beer, far left

the Canteen chain. Even Michelin-starred French restaurant L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon stocks Meantime.

Hook grew up in southeast London and the company is still based in the area. The brewery – currently undergoing expansion to allow production to increase by 10 times – is on the river at Charlton; their pub, the Greenwich Union, is nearby. And the Old Brewery is at the heart of the Greenwich World Heritage Site, amid the 18th-century grandeur of the Old Royal Naval College. It was once home to retired sailors, who were given a ration of four pints a day, brewed on this very site.

Thanks to a secondary school teacher who introduced Hook to quality beers, he headed to Munich after university to train as a brewer. "At the time it used to drive me mad, drinking in pubs, that 90 percent of the beer was crap. It tasted of nothing, it was horrible. And yet, if you searched out places, you could get some really lovely, flavourful, distinctive ales."

Full of the German respect for beer-craft, Hook returned home and helped to set up the Freedom Brewing Company and Oliver Peyton's Mash. These ventures, which included small breweries on-site, helped to turn the British public away from the mass-produced lagers and lack-lustre bitters that had taken over the nation's pubs. Hook was introducing styles from Northern Europe – such as wheat beer – as well as looking to the United States, where a world-class microbrewery scene had grown up, often reviving styles the Brits had invented but long forgotten. These beers were aimed at foodies as much as drinkers.

"It's all about introducing more variety in beer to people who are really interested in food," he says. "And who also like trying new things. But equally, I've got plans for people who I believe drink pretty poor beer and, if it wasn't for their mates laughing at them, they might actually try something else."

The problem, according to Hook, is two-fold: the massive 'Pubcos' who own thousands of premises and

force their landlords to buy mass-produced, low-quality product; but also the 'real ale' crowd who try and stamp down innovation – headed by the Campaign for Real Ale (Camra).

"I became a brewer because of Camra, I was inspired by great British cask ale," he says. "But I wouldn't ever let anyone cramp my creative style. And unfortunately that's what Camra do to a vast swathe of small brewers. There are many different genres of beer and just because they don't fit the descriptions that the Campaign for Real Ale have, doesn't give them the right to refer to them as not real beer. It's parochial."

But while Meantime use the whole range of Continental techniques, there is still a defiant Britishness about the operation.

"The centre of the brewing world in the 1750s was London," Hook says, gesturing around him. "We produced the great early original porter beers. Then, as the century moved on we produced the first pale ales. We'd already produced the first stouts, then the India Pale Ale. We led the way, and as a Londoner, I respect that tradition."

"If you spoke to a Frenchman in Bordeaux, he'd slam his hand on the table and say: 'This is the centre of the wine world and we are proud of it!'. And I think the English should do the same with beer." ♡

The Old Brewery, The Old Royal Naval College, Greenwich, London SE10, +44 (0)20 3327 1280, www.oldbrewerygreenwich.com

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