CONSUMING PASSIONS

Froth and Bubbles

It is hard to tell if Australians are really as devoted to their beer as national mythmakers (including beer advertisers) would have us believe, because Australian beer drinkers have seldom been given much choice of product. For decades, if you lived in Victoria, you had to drink Carlton and United’s products - there was simply nothing else available in Victorian pubs. New South Wales drinkers had the very slight advantage of having Tooth’s and Toohey’s to choose from.

Any buying guide to beer must include a bit of history, for the Australian brewing industry has exhibited most of the nasty features of capitalism. Monopolisation and domination of the retail trade (to exclude competition) are the features most salient to beer consumers.

True, since 1974 it has been illegal for brewing companies to ‘tie’ hotels to sell only their beer. Yet the takeover frenzy of the ‘eighties left two brewing companies dividing 90% of the Australian market between them. Consumer choice was hardly improved. Needless to say, these two companies are Mr Elliott’s Carlton and United Breweries, and Mr Bond’s Bond Brewing.

Both are now in financial difficulties which may be the best news Australian drinkers have had for some time. Carlton has enjoyed a monopoly in Victoria since the ’twenties, so it is no surprise that the Carlton corporate personality is abrasive and arrogant. For decades, Victorian publicans pleased with interstate and overseas brewers to set up in Melbourne, so oppressed were they by the Carlton monopoly. Carlton had no need to respond to consumer wishes - it made life simple for itself by supplying a narrow range of products as cheaply as possible. Even today, as one of the world’s largest brewing companies, Carlton produces an amazingly small range of brands - Fosters, Victoria Bitter, plus a few ‘local’ brands like Resch’s or Melbourne Bitter, for those who like to cling to ‘the beer we drink around here’.

Beer is a fermented drink which, like wine, displays a great variety of flavour from brewer to brewer, or even from brew to brew. However, by employing enormous scientific resources, the Australian brewing industry has been able to suppress any variation in its products.

To some extent, this is an inevitable result of the need to provide a reliable, consistent brand. However, Carlton has taken standardisation to extremes, proclaiming that its products taste exactly the same, whether produced at different breweries or whether sold in cans, bottles or draught. In its bid to ‘Fosterise the world’, Carlton is pursuing the McDonald’s strategy - offering consumers an identical product, no matter where they buy it.

It is reassuring to know that Foster’s will always and everywhere have the same distinctive wet cardboard taste (as one pundit recently described it). But, like McDonald’s, Carlton takes little account of the diversity of the market. Meanwhile, after a couple of disastrous attempts to copy the Carlton strategy, Mr Bond’s shambling, chaotic beer empire is reverting to its component parts - Swan, Toohey’s and Castlemaine - in an attempt to target particular markets. This is certainly a good thing for drinkers - Toohey’s have recently introduced two interesting new lines (Dry and Red) and have rescued Toohey’s Old from oblivion.

None of this, however, will keep Mr Bond in business as a beer baron; Bond Brewing was recently estimated to be worth minus $500 million if liquidated.

Bond Brewing’s disarray has had the fortunate effect of encouraging the fringe players in the market. Most spectacular has been the rise of Brisbane’s Power Brewing which has cleverly exploited consumer dissatisfaction with the major brewers. Power’s is an unexceptional product, but there is a certain satisfaction in drinking the ‘beer that Bondy couldn’t buy’. Other worthwhile readily available local brands are Hobart’s Cascade Premium, Sydney’s Hahn and Brewer’s, and Adelaide’s Southwark - all pleasant, if sweetish, lagers. But the true seeker after pleasure is advised to patronise the products of Adelaide’s Cooper’s and Fremantle’s Matilda Bay. Cooper’s Sparkling Ale and Matilda Bay’s Redback and Pilsner are the most distinctive and rewarding Australian products - but beware bar staff who poison Redback with lemon!

Just throwing the J-curve aside for a moment - the variety of imported beer available is constantly increasing, although space prevents recommendations. It is worth noting that beer does not always travel well. Even so sublime a beer as Czechoslovakia’s Pilsener Urquell is sometimes below par by the time it reaches these shores.

Of course, most of the beers recommended are generally only available in bottled form, although Power’s is appearing in pubs as fast as new taps can be installed. An increasing number of pubs are brewing their own, yet the results are often turbid English-style ales. For some reason, such liquids are commonly regarded as more ‘authentic’ than lagers, the internationally popular style. There are some fine pub brews, but be prepared to pick and choose.

Most of the time, though, the habitué of pubs and clubs must make do with Carlton and Bond products. This could turn us all into couch potatoes. Let’s hope for a bit more impatience from the creditors of Mr Elliott and Mr Bond!

Bud Weiser.