

Small Beer, Big Flavour!

One day in a pub, where all good ideas come from, after a pint or two, Felix James and James Grundy were bemoaning the fact that it was next to impossible to get a beer around 2% ABV. 'I was fed up with beers designed to blow your head off. All we wanted was a good tasting beer that wasn't necessarily a mad craft beer'.

Since that day 5 years ago, the pair have designed and built a unique brewery and made beer of 1% to 2.7% in alcohol content something to choose rather than a desperation purchase. So where did it all begin? Felix became involved in brewing at Mortlake and then Fuller's. But it wasn't beer that brought the pair together, rather gin. The pair met at Sipsmiths, the gin makers, where Felix was the head of ops and James was the head of sales. It was playing about on Felix's 1.5 barrel brewing kit every weekend for a year that turned, what they both thought was a bit of a joke, into something they thought had a future. The next step was getting the money, which they did through a small panel of investors. This enabled them to buy a 30 barrel plant, so they not exactly starting small, although their original 1.5 barrel plant is still proudly on display in the corner and, Felix said, it is still used from time to time for a test brew.



The brewing kit is in a cavernous industrial unit, with high ceiling, a balcony with a meeting room and another unit next door for offices. It's large enough so that their mini (with its bar) can be



overlooked as it hides in the corner and there is plenty of space to hold comedy and music events. 'They are really popular' commented Felix. 'People can come along, have a few beers and go to work next morning without a hangover'. The space has been used for wedding receptions but they don't have a wedding licence yet; there seemed to be some concerns on safety grounds about the bride coming down the high steps from the upper echelons of the brewing in a flowing dress!

Their brewery set up is unusual. Felix said 'The brewery suppliers wouldn't believe my design would work but it does. We only use 1.5 pints to brew a pint of beer and we don't wash down like most breweries. It's all CIP'.*

But that's not the only unusual thing about the brewing process. They store their beer from 3 weeks, for their Session Pale, to 8 weeks for the Lager. This maturation reduces the gluten in the beer with all the beers being low in gluten and the Lager, gluten free. The Pale and Lager are joined by a dark lager (their weakest beer at 1%) and a brown beer called Steam, which is their strongest at 2.7%.

Volume has been growing. It started as 80% bottle 'Selling to upmarket outlets such as the Ivy' said Felix. After a year it was all getting a bit much so the pair brought in Mike, who came down from the Edinburgh Beer Factory to be the head



brewer, releasing Felix 'To get on with the finances'. All the bottling is done off site and they are now testing cans.

So is their idea of lower alcohol beer new? Well, history shows it has been around centuries. Sometimes called small beer, table beer or even breakfast beer, these beers are recorded in medieval times were consumed daily even by children. In the eighteenth century, it is noted that people involved with heavy physical work would drink more than a gallon a day of this type of beer. It has also been surmised that the beer being drunk in William Hogarth's Beer Street painting (1751), which promotes beer drinking over gin, is actually table beer.



Felix lamented that small beer fell out of favour in the 1950's, although UK's Mackeson Stout at 2.8% is still around but beer of this strength is still relatively rare. On each of Small Beer's bottles is an explanation that sums up their goals succinctly 'We are the first designated small brewery to reignite the lost art of brewing classic beers below 2.8%'. With their burning commitment, and the trend towards sensible drinking, Small Beer are likely to be around for a while.

Tasting Notes

The following are the tasting notes from the London Tasting Panel.

Beer	ABV	Description
Dark Lager	1%	Smokey, roasty aroma in this reddy, dark brown beer. Palate is light drinking with a little roast and a hint of dark fruits. Finish is lightly bitter with a trace of spicy hops. Malts include Maris Otter, Black Caragold and Oats. Hops are Galana, Saaz and Mosaic.
Lager	2.1%	Light easy drinking gold coloured lager with a little lemon and tropical fruits overlaying developing sweet caramel notes and some bitterness that is present in the dry finish. Malts include Maris Otter, Crystal, Caragold and Oats. Hops are Galena, Saaz and Mosaic.
Session Pale	2.5%	Pale yellow beer with floral hop and biscuit on the nose. The biscuity sweetness in the flavour is balanced by a citrus flavour that fades quickly in the lingering bitter aftertaste. Malts are Maris Otter, Caragold, Oats, Wheat and Dextrin Malt. Hops are Galena and Chinook
Steam	2.7%	A tawny brown beer with malty toffee and fruit on the nose, which are also on the palate with spicy tart notes coming from the rye. This lingers pleasantly in the dryish finish. Malts are Maris Otter, Rye, Crystal, Wheat, Oats and Caragold. Hops are Galena, Chinook and Mosaic.

