

Michael Jackson and beer styles

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I think I was the first person ever to use the phrase 'beer style'. The next thing was to try to define what they were, which lots of people have done since, but I think I was the first person. But then my focus became really to talk about, to try to describe the flavours of beer. When I was first writing on beer, nobody else was describing the flavours in beer. It's very frustrating when you read old books on beer.¹

Brewers in the 19th century used a number of different vehicles to move their beer around. They included the dray, originally a low cart without sides; the lorry, which, before the motorised version, meant a long flat wagon with sides, running on four low wheels; and the floater, a cart with the axle 'cranked down' so that the wheels were high but the body was very near the ground. Floaters were popular with the Burton upon Trent brewers for moving full beer casks from the brewery to the railway station.

All of these were types of wagon or cart: nobody would have thought of speaking of a dray 'style' or a lorry 'style'. Similarly brewers, and writers about beer, spoke about beer 'types' or 'kinds' or 'varieties',

never 'styles'. William Brand, in *The Town and Country Brewery Book*, published in or shortly after 1830, spoke of the 'usual divisions' of malt liquor, that is, porter, ales, strong beer and small beer.² ML Byrn, author of *The Complete Practical Brewer*, published in 1852, described 'species' of beer.³ *The Curiosities of Ale and Beer*, which came out in 1889, referred only to 'various kinds of ales and beers'.⁴ A Chaston Chapman, president of the Institute of Brewing, in 1912 wrote about 'the different classes of beer brewed at the present day', the 'many different kinds' and the 'varieties' of beer.⁵ The anonymous author of *A Book About Beer* from 1934 declared that there were 'some 20 varieties of beer'⁶ and later listed five beer 'types'.⁷ Just after the Second World War, a book called *The Brewer's Art*, published by the London brewer Whitbread, in a chapter on 'The Varieties of Beer', said: 'In this country there are four chief types of beer today: pale ale, mild ale, stout and Burton'.⁸

Andrew Campbell, writing in 1956, agreed that there were 'four main types or families' of beer, though he categorised them differently from Whitbread, as dark, light, strong and lager.⁹ CJJ

Berry, the home-brewing expert, in 1963 defined ten different 'types of beer and stout'.¹⁰ Frank Baillie, in *The Beer Drinker's Companion* in 1974, had a section called 'Beer Types Defined', which categorised beers by container - 'draught beers and keg beers' and 'bottled beer' - as well as by brew - 'pale ale', 'lager', 'stout' and so on.¹¹ A year later, Conal Gregory and Warren Knock, in *Beers of Britain*, spoke only of 'kinds of beer'.¹² In 1977 an American writer, Michael Weiner, produced a book called *The Taster's Guide to Beer* which again listed what the author called 'Types of Beer', covering ten different categories (though this being an American book, Weiner listed five types of lager but lumped mild, bitter and barley wine together as 'ale').¹³

That same year of punk rock and Queen Elizabeth II's silver jubilee, Michael Jackson, with a book about English pubs already published, came out with his first beer book. *The World Guide to Beer*, Jackson later revealed, had cost him 'several thousand pounds in phone calls, letters, telegrams, travel and research assistance'.¹⁴ The book not only had a section titled 'The classical beer styles', but also drew a clear division between types of beer and styles of beer. Beers, Jackson wrote, 'fall into three broad categories', top-fermented, bottom-fermented and those brewed with wheat (a debatable tripartite division, since there appears no clear logic behind pushing wheat beers into a separate category at an equal cladistic level to the two yeast-type categories of beer:

but these were early days). There were, Jackson said,

certain classical examples within each group, and some of them have given rise to generally accepted styles ... If a brewer specifically has the intention of reproducing a classical beer, then he is working within a style. If his beer merely bears a general similarity to others, then it may be regarded as being of their type.¹⁵

Jackson had not yet completely settled his terminology: in 1982 he produced the first of a long series of *Pocket Guides to Beer* which still had a chapter headed 'Types of Beer', though the individual entries frequently referred to 'style', such as *Bière de Garde*, 'This regional style of northern France'.¹⁶ In addition the book's blurb described Jackson as 'the world's leading authority on beer styles.'

When the considerably revised *New World Guide to Beer* appeared in 1988, Jackson had refined his analysis and produced what he called a 'Family Tree of Beer Styles' with just two basic divisions, top-fermenting and bottom-fermenting, and all the many other styles, from lambic to bock, branching off those trunks.¹⁷ It was not yet an approach that was in universal use: a rival American *vademecum* to global brewing, *The Connoisseur's Guide to Beer*, by James Robertson, published in 1983, still wrote of 'The Types of Beer', including 'Lager Types', 'Ale Types', 'Stout and Porter', 'Weiss Beer' and so on.¹⁸ However, in the introduction to Robertson's book, the





Figure 1. British Guild of Beer Writers trip to West Flanders, January 1988. Poperinge Hop Museum

- 1 Michael Jackson, journalist and beer writer; 2 Ted Bruning, journalist and beer writer; 3 John Simpson, cartoonist
- 4 Roger Protz, journalist and beer writer; 5 Unknown Belgian; 6 Mike Bennett, journalist;
- 7 Brian Glover journalist and beer writer; 8 Danny Blythe journalist and beer writer; 9 Martin Kemp, owner, Pitfield Brewery;
- 10 Tim Webb, beer writer; 11 Iain Dobson, administrator, Campaign for Real Ale; 12 Maryn Cornell, journalist and beer writer;
- 13 Tim Clarke, travel company owner; 14 Lynne Arblaster, travel company owner

beer writer Bob Abel spoke of 'a wide diversity of beer styles.' The 1983 edition of the *Good Beer Guide*, talking about lager, called it 'a beer-style [sic] brewed in a distinctively different matter' from traditional British draught beer, one of the earliest uses I have been able to find of the phrase 'beer style' by the Campaign for Real Ale.¹⁹

The most important push to Jackson's pioneering idea that beer came in different styles, not just 'types' or 'varieties', came when it was taken up enthusiastically by an extremely influential American beer writer, Fred Eckhardt. In 1989 Eckhardt self-published a book called *The Essentials of Beer Style: A Catalog of Classic Beer Styles for Brewers and Beer Enthusiasts*.²⁰ Eckhardt's book was seized upon by the growing American home brewing scene, which was also adopting Michael Jackson as one of the gurus of a movement of beer appreciation that looked at reproducing and imitating beers from all the world's major brewing traditions. In Jackson's and Eckhardt's writings, American home brewers found descriptions that enabled them, by matching what they read to what they then made themselves, to fulfil their ambitions of brewing beers just like those found in Europe and elsewhere. Eckhardt's writings in particular informed the Beer Judge Certification Program in the United States, which supplied (and supplies) judges to home-brew competitions, as it developed 'style guidelines' for different categories in home-brewing competitions in the early and mid-1990s.²¹

The home brewing movement fed into what became a rapidly expanding boutique or microbrewing movement in the United States, with homebrewers leveraging their skills to turn a hobby into a profession.²² These 'new' professional brewers brought the idea of 'beer styles' with them into the brewing industry, and used the idea of beer styles to talk to their customers about what they were brewing,²³ widening the knowledge of the concept of styles of beer. When beer 'appreciation' websites such as Ratebeer.com (founded 2000) sprang up, they naturally used the 'beer styles' ideas pioneered by Jackson to help their contributors categorise the beers they were rating.

Meanwhile in Britain beer writers were finding Jackson's terminology extremely useful in explaining, in particular, unfamiliar beers. Thus Brian Glover, in the *Camra Dictionary of Beer* in 1985, spoke of "the Trappist style" of Belgian ale, and 'Kolsch, Cologne's very own top-fermented German beer style'.²⁴ By the late 1990s, 20 years after Jackson introduced the idea, the concept of beer styles was completely mainstream, so that Roger Protz would call the bulk of his *The Taste of Beer* 'Brewing Styles'.²⁵

But what made Michael Jackson talk about 'beer styles' when earlier writers had been happy to divide beer into 'types' or 'varieties' or 'kinds'? In *The English Pub*, the book that led to Jackson getting the commission to write *The World Guide to Beer*, there is a chapter called 'Drinking Styles', but it still covered what

he called 'kinds' of beer rather than 'styles'.²⁶ However, Jackson, a journalist, would have been very familiar with the idea of 'style guides', something to be found in every newspaper and magazine office: booklets or printed sheets that dictate a publication's 'style' on everything from single versus double quote marks to whether people's names take the honorific 'Mr' or 'Mrs' on second mention. Jackson had almost certainly been involved in producing style guides for publications, especially as he had been launch editor in the late 1960s of *Campaign*, the trade magazine of the advertising industry, which would have needed a style guide. When he was writing his first beer guide it seems very possible he was influenced by journalistic terminology to make his new book a 'style guide', a guide to beer 'styles', rather than beer 'varieties'.

Whatever the origins of the idea, as Jackson told the American publication *All About Beer* in 1997, he seems to be the first person to have used the phrase 'beer style', and his influence in coining the idea of beer styles cannot be overestimated. There is hardly a writer about beer today anywhere in the world who does not use the expression Jackson pioneered and popularised. Inevitably, because he was a pioneer, and especially because his job was to describe the beer scene as he found it, rather than to research it as a historian, there are areas of Jackson's work on beer styles that later writers have had to amend or widen in the light of investigations into old brew-

ing records and the like. His description in 1988 of Mild as 'Porter's sweeter, gentler young brother',²⁷ for example, would not be accepted today by historians of beer styles, who have shown that modern Mild has at least some of its roots in the Ales produced in the 18th and 19th centuries by the rivals to the big London Porter brewers,²⁸ and no links at all to Porter. One formerly important British beer style, Burton Ale, had effectively almost died out when Jackson began writing about beer in 1977, is not mentioned as a style in his writings, and as a result, it seems, Burton Ale remains very little known today. This is, perhaps, the negative side to Michael Jackson's huge importance in the development of ideas about beer styles: the apparent perception by many, especially in North America, that only the styles he mentioned have reality.

This is, however, a quibble. Without Michael Jackson, it would not have been possible for Matt Dunn, a historian of the philosophy of science, to ask: 'What's a beer style?'. Dunn attempted to answer his own question with a lengthy discussion on 'conventionalist' and 'realist' classifications, in the book *Beer & Philosophy*.²⁹ The discussion involved imagining two places called Köln and Twin Köln, inhabited by famous beer writers called Michael Jackson and Twin Köln Michael Jackson respectively, each drinking a beer called Kölsch. Thanks to Michael Jackson, we know what Kölsch is. It's not a type of beer, or a variety of beer: it's a beer style.

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Michael James Jackson (27 March 1942 – 30 August 2007) was an English writer and journalist. He was the author of many influential books about beer and whisky. He was a regular contributor to a number of British broadsheets, particularly The Independent and The Observer. Jackson's books have sold over three million copies worldwide and have been translated into eighteen different languages. He is credited with helping to start a renaissance of interest in beer and breweries worldwide in the 1970s