

Asia, Australia now serious beer producers, consumers

Generally, when we think of countries that produce beer, the usual suspects are Holland, Germany, Belgium, England, Canada, the Czech Republic and the United States.

While China was one of the first societies to create beer, the drink fell out of favour in 220AD.

However, there are many other countries that produce great beer but are not necessarily recognized as 'world beer powers,' nations like Ireland, Mexico, Brazil, Italy, Poland and Denmark. Another area of the world that has become a serious producer and consumer of beer is Asia and, by extension, Australia.

There are many nations in Asia, such as Thailand, Korea and the Philippines, that are fairly minor beer producers, but there are some major producers as well. The biggest players in the Asian beer market are China, Japan and India.

As far as the origins of beer go, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt can all make claims as the originating society of beer. To this end, so can China. Archaeological findings suggest that the Chinese were brewing a beer-like alcoholic drink as early as 7000 BC. This was done on a small or individual scale, and was usually made with rice, honey, grapes and hawthorn fruit. If correct, this would mean that the Chinese were using the same brewing methodology as the Egyptians and Mesopotamians 2000 years before those empires did.

With this massive head start in brewing, one would think that the Chinese would be the leader of all the "beer powers," but it was not to be. Shortly after the collapse of the Han Dynasty in 220 AD, beer fell out of favour in Chinese society. It was replaced by huangjiu (yellow-coloured liquor that has a bit more in common with wine than beer), which became the beverage of choice for nearly 1,600 years.

The advent of "modern" brewing in China really didn't get under way until the late 1800s. With the arrival of the European powers in China, there was a desire to set up breweries to provide one of the comforts of home to those stationed there. The first brewery was set up in Harbin by the Russians, followed shortly by the Germans and Czechs. This foreign investment has left a lingering legacy in China. In fact, Tsingtao Beer (China's largest brewing company) was established in a brewery abandoned by Germans shortly after the First World War.

In Japan, brewing doesn't have quite as lengthy a history, but the origins of Japanese brewing can be traced back as far as 300AD when sake began to emerge in writings of the period. Although made with rice (and often referred to as a rice wine), sake is made in much the same manner as beer.

Modern brewing in Japan arrived sometime during the Tokugawa Period (1603-1868). Despite a government directive that called for the expulsion of most foreigners, the Dutch managed to hang on and continued to trade with the Japanese during this isolationist period. During this period, the Dutch opened a small brewery and beer halls for their sailors.

Currently, beer is the top alcoholic product drunk by the Japanese. It accounts for nearly two-thirds of all alcohol consumed in the nation. The major domestic breweries are Kirin, Sapporo, Asahi and Suntory. Their production is heavy on lagers and light beers, as they are the dominant styles in the country. Microbreweries have been slower to develop because up until 1994,

Japanese liquor licences for brewing were only granted to breweries capable of producing at least 2 million litres of beer per year.

That amount was lowered to a much more reasonable 60,000 litres, thus allowing the spread of microbreweries throughout the nation. There are currently more than 200 microbreweries in Japan making a wide variety of beer styles. These breweries are also showing innovation in creating styles that are uniquely Japanese, such as the miso lagers that use miso (a soy paste usually used in soy sauce) to enhance the flavour and richness of the beer.

Beer found its way to India via the British Empire in the early 1700s. Beer was shipped to India from England to meet the demand of the British administrators who wanted a refreshing beverage to help cope with the heat of the Indian climate. This demand ended up creating a whole new style of beer, the India Pale Ale (IPA). The IPA was strong, highly hopped ale designed to survive the five-month journey from England to India. Eventually this style of ale became very popular throughout the British Empire.

The first actual brewery in India was created in the late 1820s in a place called Kasauli, in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains. Set up by Edward Dyer, this new brewery created Asia's first marketed beer called Lion.

Currently, the Indian beer market has been experiencing double-digit growth over the last decade and has become very lager-centric. IPAs are no longer brewed in India and there has been a rise in rice-based beers. The most popular brews are Kingfisher and Hayward 5000.

Founded in 1778 as a British penal colony, Australia's liquor of choice was rum. Over time (and with a little government help) that choice slowly changed to beer. Despite being settled by British ale drinkers, the most prominent beer style consumed is lager. This is because Australia has a hot, dry climate, as opposed to England's wet, cool climate.

The first official brewer in Australia was John Boston who brewed a beer-like beverage in the late 1700s made from Indian corn bittered with Cape gooseberry leaves.

Initial brewing efforts were quick fermenting ales; the lager eventually showed up in 1885. The beer of this era was produced without using hops, as hops were proving difficult to cultivate in Australia. It took 30 years before a decent crop of hops was cultivated, and even longer before they were grown in an amount that would allow for wide scale use in brewing.

Currently, Australia is the fourth largest consumer of beer in the world with beer commanding nearly half of all the liquor drunk. Although lager dominates the market (to the tune of 95 per cent of the sales), there are still many microbreweries that are producing many other styles. Stout, in particular, has grown quite popular in certain Australian beer-drinking circles. The domestic market in Australia is dominated by two giant beer companies, Foster's Group and Lion Nathan, with Cooper's being the largest family-owned brewery. It should also be noted that Foster's Lager (the beer most identified with Australia) is not readily available in Australia, and is generally considered to be export only.

Asia and Australia are quickly becoming powerhouses in the global beer scene. Soon, these nations will become movers and shakers, standing tall alongside the traditional world beer powers.

Recommendations:

- * Kirin Ichiban Special Premium Reserve (Japan) 355ml \$2.83/bottle
- * Sapporo Premium (Japan) 650ml \$4.29/can
- * Victoria Bitter (Australia) 500ml \$3.56/can

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