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CULTURE THROUGH THE LENS OF FOOD

The Gentrification of Beer

by Nick Mulgrew



I wasn't much of a beer drinker ten years ago. Few seventeen-year-olds are, I suppose. That said, by the time I left home – six months before attaining full legal adulthood – I already had a bit of a reputation. The day I matriculated, for example, I mixed a fifth of a bottle of Jungle Yum concentrate into a half-jack of Russian Bear and regained meaningful consciousness roughly 24 hours later.

Moving to Grahamstown for university meant entering an environment in which this behaviour was encouraged. Every term, the Student Union would have a “clearance sale”, during which you could buy a shot of straight cane spirit for fifty cents. We even had a bar in our residence. It was called the Bengal Rifle Club, and you could drink unlimited box wine there for R15. So I did.

After a few months of this, though, my hangovers began to get worse. Around this time, I met a woman, and my future bandmate, T. She was from Welkom and had two much older brothers, which meant she had had a taste for Black Label (*tasting notes: hay, industrial grain, banana finish*) from the age of twelve, give or take. So I started drinking it too. It was a revelation. What I once thought bitter was now slaking. What used to feel bloating was now satisfying. And it was only five bucks at the Bengal Rifle Club. So, like most South African drinkers, I became a lager drinker.

Lager is the vanilla of modern beer. It's ubiquitous – at its worst, boring; at its best, transcendent. A hot climate and the advent of scientific brewing – along with a mostly-uncontested monopoly, as well as its exploitation of township beer halls – allowed the South African Breweries to become what was, until its acquisition last year, the world's second-largest manufacturer of beer. The economies of scale meant that this beer was cheap. Accessible, unlike almost everything else, to most of the South African market.

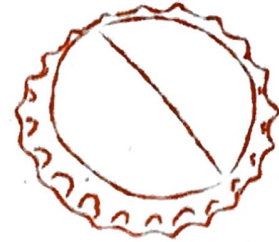
During my time in Grahamstown, the most a 330ml dumpy cost was nine bucks fifty, with draughts peaking at R15. (R18 if you were fancy and drank Peroni (*tasting notes: must, bread, wet herbs*.) Changes were happening, though, outside of the backwaters of provincial settlements. Grahamstown is a city – and I use the term “city” solely as a technical term – that is culturally isolated and insulated from the rest of the country. Although the southern Cape is the original hotbed of microbrewing (or, to use the gross marketing moniker, craft beer) in South Africa, expensive beer could never take hold in a student town with an unemployment rate of about 70%.

Imagine my surprise, then, when T. and I took our band to Johannesburg, to play at a hip café in Illovo owned by a hip band's frontman and his blog-famous wife. They sold these beautiful looking beers there, bottles holding a full half-litre with gorgeous minimal yellow circular labels. T ordered two & Union Steph Weisses (*tasting notes: banana ester, fresh bread, clove*) and only got back R20 from her hundred. She complained, only to be informed that the beers here are R40 each. We were supposed to be playing for beer money; at this place, with the amount we drank at the time, we would be making a loss.

I've come to see this experience as a bad omen. Anecdotally, the price of the average draught I've bought has, over the last ten years, risen from R13,50 to R32 – an increase of about double the rate of inflation. But this isn't because I've gone from drinking Hansa Pilsener (*tasting notes: Durban North*) to CBC Pilsner (*tasting notes: sulphur, noble hops, light malt*) – this increase is for the same macrobrewed lager I've always casually drank.

I have a lot to thank microbrew for – including my first real jobs in writing – but I cannot forgive it for one thing. While the ascent of microbrewery brands in the country's middle- and upper-class enclaves has not made much of a dent in SAB's monolithic grip on the beer market, it has forever unintentionally ruined one of beer's great properties. Craft beer ruined cheap beer.

People in Johannesburg and Cape Town found it totally fine to drink R40 beers not because the beer was especially great, but because it also looked cool and went against the grain. During the heady days of 2012, I heard many a person at a beer festival – like the epoch-defining We Love Real Beer – swear off SAB for life. "I can't drink mass-produced crap anymore!" they'd say, after taking their first-ever sip of Devil's Peak King's Blockhouse IPA (*tasting notes: resin, grapefruit*). Except, of course, they'd go back to drinking it the next time they went to the cricket, or to their local, because microbrew was expensive. (And rare, and, if they were honest to themselves, inconsistent in quality.)



The problem is, though, once macrobrew marketers and bar owners noticed that drinkers were willing to pay R40 for a bottle of beer, and do so semi-regularly, there was no point in keeping beer prices low. Since 2012, the price difference between macrobrew and microbrew has narrowed substantially, and not in drinkers' favour. What was once expensive has become normal, and prices that were once the domain of the bar have now entered the bottle shop.

There's craft beer now in Grahamstown. There's a brewery just outside of town, Featherstone, and its produce is actually really good, especially its Golden Mole IPA (*tasting notes: sweet malt, stone fruit*). But while I – and almost every other person who likes beer – appreciates what microbreweries have done to expand the amount of beer available at our bars and bottle shops, there's a part of me that still yearns to put a small brown note down on the counter, and get a small brown bottle in return, with change. And I don't think that yearning has everything to do with a ten years' old nostalgia.

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*Nick Mulgrew is the author of three books, the latest of which is a collection of fiction, The First Law of Sadness, out from David Philip in August 2017. He was a weekly beer columnist for the Sunday Times between 2013 and 2015, and has written about South African beer for publications all over the world.*

