

# Going Head to Head

**Nick Mulgrew** quaffs the history of beer brands in SA — and spots their loyal tribes

Illustrations: **Infiltrate Media**



GALLO IMAGES/ISTOCK PHOTOS

IT'S a pretty good case study on how to destroy a brand. "New Lion is smooth and easy — are you?" the press release crooned. It was 2000, and over the previous two decades, Lion Lager hadn't been selling like it used to.

Still, as it had been throughout its 114-year life, it was one of the most recognisable brand names in the country. Through careful positioning, Lion had become intimately associated with sports teams, national heritage and South African masculinity at large.

"SAB took the decision to boldly try to reposition Lion," says Ian Penhale, the marketing director at South African Breweries.

It didn't exactly work. In an attempt to appeal to young drinkers — curiously described in the press release as people who "spend long hours in mixed gender environments, and [for whom] music and social interaction is crucial" — SAB tossed aside Lion's traditional gold and red heraldry. Now the so-called "pride of beers" was dressed in silver and blue livery, all minimalist circles and sans-serifs. To the chagrin of loyal drinkers, the beer's taste had changed too. It was now sweeter, and less bitter.

"The re-branded product failed to establish credibility with the intended younger target market," says Penhale, "and at the same time it alienated the small remainder of

existing consumers." Lion was taken off the shelves in 2003 and is now firmly resigned to the realms of nostalgia.

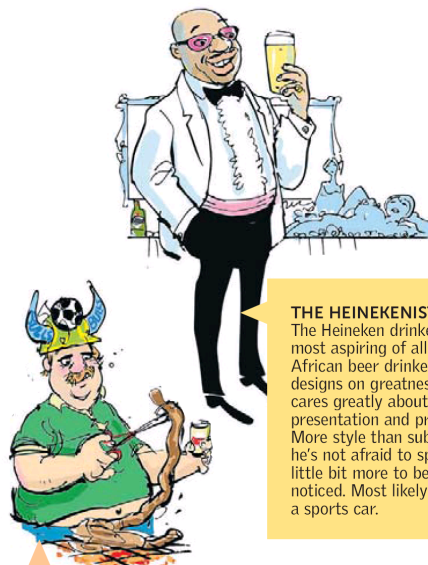
Credibility? Alienation? Nostalgia? These are some strong words — and this is beer we're talking about, after all. But beer matters to people. Even though the differences between most mass-produced brands of local beer are relatively tiny — they're mostly different iterations of pale lagers and stouts — the beer you drink signals a lot about you: your social status, your values, your aspirations.

Or so say marketing managers. That said: beer undeniably does have an entrenched place in South African society.

"We know Southern Africa has been a beer-drinking region from our earliest recorded histories," says Anne Mager, a professor at the University of Cape Town's Department of Historical Studies and the author of the book, *Beer, Sociability, and Masculinity in South Africa*.

"We know beer and beer brewing were an important part of celebration, as reward for labour, for the indulgences of royal families and so on."

The social role beer played in early SA societies has filtered through to modern times — a fact that perhaps informed British historian Robert Ross's argument that "much of South Africa's history can be written through its drinking habits



#### THE HEINEKENIST

The Heineken drinker is the most aspiring of all South African beer drinkers. With designs on greatness, he cares greatly about presentation and presence. More style than substance, he's not afraid to spend a little bit more to be noticed. Most likely to drive a sports car.

#### THE CASTLE LAGERITE

Sports mad, and often seen prowling around the peripheries of braais, bearing tongs, woks rolls and a (non-muscular) six-pack. He can usually be discerned by his guttural shouts — usually at the TV while the Boks are playing. Hates Australia.

was owned for decades by Ohlsson's Cape Breweries and Union and so was popular in the Cape.

But that's only if you could legally drink these beers. Along with the other hundreds of injustices and stupidities propagated by white governments, black people were prohibited from drinking so-called "European liquor" until 1962. This selective prohibition — which extended to European styles of beer like lager and pale ale — was motivated by simple racism. It was a measure to combat what administrators perceived to be the idleness, violence and drunkenness of black society — and broadly to try to ensure a supply of sober workers for mines and farms.

During that time, rare exemptions aside, their choice would be limited to lower-alcohol, sorghum-based beers — a large source of revenue for municipalities that had acquired monopolies on brewing sorghum beer — or illicit home brews. Those, or whatever "European" beers your local shebeen could smuggle in. Hence glass-bottled lager became a symbol of social aspiration and freedom from state control.

The end of prohibition coincided with the birth of modern marketing and branding.

"What's extraordinary," Mager says, "is that back then, the South African market knew nothing about branding. SAB sent staff off to learn

and regulations".

Suitably, before the 1960s, and before the birth of modern marketing, the beer you drank had a lot more to do with practicality than which brand philosophy you most identified with — like where you lived, or who owned your local brewery.

Lion Ale was wildly popular in the Natal Midlands, for example, and Castle was big on the coast. Lion Lager was originally Pretorian, but





**ALE & HEARTY:**  
The legendary Radium Beer Hall in Orange Grove, Johannesburg.  
Picture: DANIEL BORN



**HANSARIANS**  
One of the commonest species of South African beer drinkers, Hansa Pilsener fans are diverse, versatile, and ubiquitous. While they care about variety, they mostly need drinkability and simplicity from their beer — the easier it goes down, the better.



**THE AMSTELITE**  
The Amstel drinker enjoys the premium things in life: good art, nice cars and fine food. She might seem snobby and parochial, but she's not really; she just likes to explore, and enjoy her own way of doing things. She is loath to drink any other beer.

**The WINDHOEKER**  
He likes things different — but not too different. Generally easy-going, he can be overly concerned with the provenance of what he pours down his throat. He doesn't like to be perceived as part of the mainstream, even though in reality he's still sort-of part of the mainstream.

**The CASTLE MILK STOUTER**  
The Milk Stouter is a traditionalist, true to his roots, and appreciates the importance of slowing down every now and then. He presents himself well but tends to keep a minimal profile. He may be a beer connoisseur, harping on about Milk Stout's "richness" and "complexity".

**The CASTLE LITEWEIGHT**  
Hip, young and self-assured, the Castle Lite drinker likes the concept of a premium beer, but generally wants to stay trim for the club and/or boardroom. Image-conscious but not preening, the stereotypical Castle Lite can be identified by his bright plumage and expensive haircut.

**THE BLACK LABELER**  
"Zamalek" drinkers place importance on value for money and working-class credentials, regardless of whether or not they're actually working class. Carling Black Label fanatics work hard and relax hard — and see their drink of choice as the fuel and reward for both. Quarts are preferred, naturally.



to a recent report in Business Day.

Still, some newer start-ups, such as Cape Brewing Company, are backed by large foreign brewers. There is also the growing presence of international beverage giants Heineken and Diageo, brewers of many so-called "premium" brands — some of which, such as Amstel and Guinness, used to be brewed by SAB under licence.

Diageo and Heineken's partner in their Brandhouse stable, Namibia Breweries, have made in-roads into South Africa by building on their dominance at home. Namibia Breweries also used the power of rumour, along with their alignment with the German beer purity law, the *Reinheitsgebot*, to insinuate that SAB's products are less than "pure". (SAB insists the only "other stuff" they put in their beers is maize.)

But SAB didn't become the world's second-biggest brewer of beer by accident. The company has managed to dominate the local alcohol market by anticipating changes in society — through experience and luck and planning and politicking — and changing their image accordingly.

"They were particularly challenged by changes in the country,"

Mager says, "especially as the kind of white, sporty masculinity they offered didn't fly in the black market."

In 1966, for instance, SAB started brewing Carling Black Label on licence from Canada, and marketed it as "America's lusty, lively beer". Black Label's disassociation with South African heritage, and thus apartheid, enhanced its appeal. And as political change loomed in the '80s, advertising for beers featured multiracial gatherings, with beer as a uniting force.

Life seldom imitates advertising, however, and probably for the better — lest we live in a dystopian, hyper-nationalist, hyper-patriarchal society that uses braais as cultural currency. (Or at least one even more so than the one we live in now.)

But in many ways society aligns itself by the values that advertising espouses, and there's a cocktail of social values that consumers buy in to when they buy their lager.

"It's not sustainable for the attitudes of the past to carry through today," Mager says. And beer is a conduit for those attitudes, more so than most things. It isn't just beer you put into their mouth, after all.



**INTERESTING PINT:** Beer House in Cape Town boasts 99 bottles of beer on the wall  
Picture: SHELLEY CHRISTIANS

in the USA, who then came back and changed the whole way the company operated. It set the bar for marketing in South Africa."

Brand identities for beers were created, through packaging and advertising and positioning certain beers with certain social values — as symbols of aspiration, of masculinity and of nationalism.

"Local beer brands trade strongly on the idea of heritage," Mager says. "Some have history, and some just make it up."

Like Hansa Pilsener, introduced to the South African market in 1975 in response to, in Penhale's words, "local market conditions calling for a brand of beer with Germanic heritage". (Interestingly, the short-lived brewery of Louis Luyt in the 1970s also relied heavily on Germanic heritage, in response to SAB's perceived Englishness. "It was the next best thing to the Boer War," Mager laughs.)

Along with heritage — the ideas of tradition and national identity, particularly, along with symbols of power such as lions and castles — beer branding has historically been heavily dependent on masculinity and masculine stereotypes.

"The kinds of masculinities SAB and other breweries pin beers to are particularly South African," says Mager. "They're outdoorsy, sporty, very macho sorts of stereotypes." SAB brands have sponsored men's national sports teams — one alone

sponsors rugby, cricket and soccer. Sport and beer and men — a simple and effective and deeply influential equation. And this has led to a perception that beer is a man's drink, an arbitrary distinction.

More recently, however, marketing has been a defter affair, focusing on the quality of ingredients, drinkers' aspirations, alignment with role models other than sports-

men and the vague concept of premium-ness.

Perhaps that's because there are more (and more hearty) competitors to SAB in the South African beer market than ever before. There are now over 80 microbreweries in the country, who try to appeal to more discerning drinkers, although they altogether only represent about 1% of market share, according