

## Mild Ale: A brief history

An excellent summary of the origins of mild, and the meaning behind the appellation, is provided by brewing historian Ron Pattinson (2014):

*The two words in the term mild ale each mean something quite specific. “Mild” describes the level of conditioning. In this context “mild” means unaged. The opposite of “mild” in this sense is “stock”, which describes beer that was stored and matured before sale [pp. 97-98]*

The ageing – or lack thereof – of ale is significant because prior to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the process largely took place in wooden vats, or casks. Beer or ale left to mature in contact with wood can take on a range of flavours, aroma's and textures including notes of pineapple, spice, earthy wood, leather or tobacco. These transformations occur due to the activity of organisms that reside in the wood, such as various forms of bacteria, and wild yeast known as *Brettanomyces* (Sutula, 1999, p. 16; White & Zainasheff, 2010, pp. 58-60). *Brett* as it's known colloquially, is able to live on the sugars naturally present in the oak, surviving until the cask is refilled after which it slowly gets to work, fermenting fresh sugars that brewer's yeast (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*) cannot, and eventually giving a drier beer with a little more alcohol and CO<sub>2</sub>. *Brettanomyces* and cohabiting bacteria may also contribute some acidity. 'Stock' malt beverages that developed this complex aged profile were sometimes described as 'stale':

*“[...] from the same word as stall, something that stands or has been stood” (Cornell, 2010, p. 26).*

A rich beer that has been aged in wood can develop a great deal of depth and complexity that would be lacking if it were consumed fresh or 'mild'. The action of *brett* can dry out the flavour, perhaps adding some acidity too, making the beer less syrupy sweet. However not all beers or ales benefit from ageing. Mild, by definition, has always been a drink intended to be consumed fresh. It works best as a local beer, showcasing quality malt and hops with an easy-drinking quality.

Returning to the term 'mild ale', Pattinson goes on to clarify that the term 'ale' also held a specific meaning:

*In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, beer and ale were not synonyms, but two distinct types of drink. The general term for both was malt liquor.*

*Ale was the descendant of the malt liquors made in Britain before the introduction of hops in the fifteenth century. Beer was the name given to the newfangled hopped malt liquor that spread to Britain with European immigrants.*

*From the 1600's on, some hops were included in most ales, but far fewer – usually about one-third of the amount – than used in beer. The difference ran so deep that even the barrel sizes weren't the same [...] Brewers specialized in brewing one or the other, a practice that, in London, lasted until the 1830's.” (2014, pp. 97-98)*

Ale has a much longer history in Britain than beer, the term 'ale' going back to the early medieval period (Cornell, 2010, p. 23; Pattinson, 2011, p. 10; Sutula, 1999, p. 12). However, beer in the early 1700's was a more versatile drink. It was brewed to a range of alcoholic content, including low ABV

'table' and 'small beer', the latter being around 3.5% ABV (Pattinson, 2011, p. 17). Hops have preservative qualities when used in brewing, so a weak beer is less likely to spoil than an equivalent, low-hopped ale (Brown, 2004, p. 41; Hieronymus, 2012, p. 19). Ale was typically brewed middling to strong in alcohol (anywhere from around 6% to 10% ABV) as the alcoholic content afforded some protection from spoilage (Brown, 2004, p. 41; Pattinson, 2011, p. 17).

Whilst some ale may have been aged, particularly on the estates of the landed gentry, the lower hopping rate compared to beer would have encouraged a trend toward the production of fresh or 'mild' malt liquor (Cornell, 2010, p.28). The association between the terms 'ale' and 'mild' was such that in London a patron could ask for 'ale' at the bar and be confident in being served mild:

*Their ale was sold mild, that is young, and 'ale', at least in London, became a synonym for 'mild'. (ibid., pp. 27-28, my emphasis)*

In the mid-18th and early 19th centuries, London breweries that specialised in brewing beer focused their efforts on porter and stout. Although porter beer was sold in both mild and aged varieties, its commercial success can be largely attributed to the bulk-aging process. Originally, the beer was kept in upright casks called butts, but later, vast oak vats were used for this purpose (Mosher, 2004, p. 94; Sutula, 1999, pp. 30-31). This method of bulk-aging gave brewers a product with the coveted "aged" flavour, while maximising storage space and ultimately making the product cheaper for the consumer. While pale and amber beers were certainly being brewed during this period, they were not the focus of the big beer breweries in London. In contrast, ale brewers specialised in a range of freshly brewed (mild) malt beverages, some of which were comparatively pale and brewed using lightly kilned malt. The ale brewers often used the letter X to denote the strength of their products, a single X being weaker than a double and so forth (Cornell, 2010, p. 31; Pattinson, 2014, p. 99). The use of X's on beer labels persists to this day.

The use of different size casks for ale and beer came to an end in 1829 (Pattinson, 2022). London Porter brewers had started to brew mild ale by the 1830's, and ale brewers had taken up brewing porter and stout too (Cornell, 2010, p. 33). Possibly the gradual amalgamation of industries brought an end to a meaningful distinction between 'ale' and beer in British lexicon (Sutula, 1999, p. 35). In 1830 the Beer Act was passed which, amongst other changes, granted automatic licences to pubs that would sell beer and ale only (Pattinson, 2014):

*Thousands of beer houses, as the new beer-only pubs were called, opened within a few years. The demand for mild ale boomed along with the beer houses (p. 99).*

Mild had been quite fashionable amongst the wealthy in London through much of the 19th century, whilst porter was regarded as a working-class drink (Cornell, 2010, p. 29). However toward the end of that century, the price of mild dropped to a similar point as porter, making it widely accessible (ibid., p. 33). By the 1870's mild ale had well and truly overtaken porter in popularity (Pattinson, 2022).

In 1880 the Inland Revenue Act, also known as the Free Mash-Tun Act, resulted in beer being taxed based on its volume and strength, rather than the amount of malt used. The corollary of the act was that brewers could use a wider range of fermentable ingredients - or 'adjuncts' - in their beer including rice, maize and sugar (Pattinson, 2014, p. 101). The latter in particular, allowed brewers to experiment with a range of additional flavours. Based on modern versions of these brewing sugars, these flavours ranged from light honey in the lighter type, to ripe fruit and fig in the darker varieties. Incorporating adjuncts into the mash tun can have multiple benefits for beer production. Rice, maize and sugar reduce the protein content, resulting in a faster clearing time, while also adjusting the

flavour profile and improving maturation rate. Flaked maize can provide a mild corn-like taste and thin the body of a beer. However it also dilutes flavours that might otherwise be too 'heavy' or stodgy, teasing out the various malt components and accentuating subtle notes. The advantages of flaked maize may be more evident in cask conditioned ale compared to kegged beer. The warmer serving temperature (around 13 to 14°C) and lower carbonation levels of cask ale allow delicate flavours to shine, which would otherwise be lost in a colder, carbonated beverage (Clissold, 1997, p. 46). It is perhaps for this reason that flaked maize remains a common ingredient in nuanced UK pale ales (Northern\_Brewer, 2022).

### **Victorian Mild: What did it taste like?**

Victorian era mild was very hoppy by today's standards, and a typical grist - the fermentable component of a recipe - was often just pale malt (Pattinson, 2011, p. 31). In this regard, some craft beer today, including Indian Pale Ale (IPA), would have been regarded as mild ale during the Victorian era. This is particularly so with fuller flavoured beer with fresh hop and malt character. Remarkably, the alcohol content found in modern IPA would not have been out of place in 19th century mild either:

*For Victorian brewers, [...] any beer, strong or weak, hoppy or not, dark or light, could be called mild if it was young enough (Cornell, 2010, p. 23)*

And:

*Late 19th-century X Ales [mild] look ridiculously strong to modern eyes, often weighing in at over around 1060<sup>g</sup>. Believe it or not, gravities had declined. In the 1850s, most London examples of the style had been over 1070<sup>g</sup>.*

*It wasn't just in terms of gravity that these Milds differed from modern versions. The rate of hopping was much higher. Averaging around 8 lbs [3.63kg] per quarter (336 lbs) [152kg] of malt, my calculations leave some at over 50 IBU [International Bittering Units] (Pattinson, 2022)*

Depending on how much the ale fermented, a starting gravity of 1060 or 1070 could produce a beverage of around 6 or 7% ABV. Brewing records collated by (Pattinson, 2011) indicate that often mild ales didn't attenuate (ferment out) as much as the same brewery's pale ale. Whitbread brewery's X ale of 1836 was brewed to an original gravity (OG – an indication of sugar content) of 1.074 but a final gravity of 1.0316, giving an alcohol content of just 5.61% ABV and probably leaving the ale very full bodied (Pattinson, 2011, p. 347). The degree of attenuation was one of the distinguishing factors between mild and pale ales, with the latter also being brewed with water containing more gypsum, fermented at lower temperature and sometimes at a lower starting gravity (sugar content) than the equivalent mild (Pattinson, 2011, pp. 68-69). This meant that pale ales had a drier finish compared to mild, with a more assertive palate-cleansing hop character. In contrast mild would have had a heavier, rounded mouth feel. The international bittering units (IBU's) cited by Pattinson above would be commensurate with the lower range of modern American IPA (50-80 IBU's) (Steele, 2012, p. 223).

When looking at recipes for Victorian mild, it is important to consider that the pale malt used to brew these beers was not the same as the malt widely used today. The delightfully named Maris Otter is one of the most celebrated varieties of barley for making British style pale ale malt. However this variety wasn't developed until the mid 1960's (Arnold, n.d). Throughout the Victorian era the preeminent malting barley was Chevallier: a variety revived from seed in 2012 by Dr. Chris

Ridout of the John Innes Centre, UK (Cornell, 2019; Mallett, 2014, p. 169). Dr Ridout observed that when compared to a modern variety, beer brewed from Chevallier had a bigger mouthfeel; seemed to require a greater amount of hops for a given perceived bitterness; and finished fermenting with a higher residual gravity (producing less alcohol) (Cornell, 2013). My own experience with Chevallier matches these observations. I've also found the malt to produce darker wort (the barley sugar solution that ferments into beer) than regular pale malt, with a distinctive flavour, perhaps a bit like flapjack.

Currently Crisp Malt is the sole producer of pale malt using Chevallier barley. It's unclear to what extent the characteristics of their product result directly from malting that particular barley strain, and which result from stylistic and marketing choices. Nevertheless, if we assume that their Chevallier malt accurately represents 19th century materials, we can draw some general conclusions about the flavour and appearance of Victorian mild. Despite being brewed using only pale malt, it is probable that the beer had an amber hue, although some mild was brewed with a special 'white malt' rather than pale, and these may have been golden hued. The malt flavour was likely rich, complex and full, with cereal-malt-fruit notes complemented by a balanced bitterness from the hops. As the 19th century came to a close and the Georgian era began, mild may have been less "chewy" but still flavourful due to the use of sugar and other adjuncts. In spite of my earlier comparison, Victorian mild probably tasted quite distinct to modern IPA. However, both share more similarities with each other than with mid-20th-century mild ale.

Mild ale was at the peak of its popularity during the most active period of European colonisation of Aotearoa. Cornell (2010) suggests that it may be the grandfather of the classic Kiwi draught:

*The taste for mild was taken to Britain's colonies in the nineteenth century [...] However the only colonial country where mild became a big seller was New Zealand, perhaps because it was settled at a time in the nineteenth century, the 1850s, when mild was becoming the dominant style among the young beer drinkers who were most likely to be emigrants. There it was probably the ancestor of the sweet, amber-coloured beer style now known as 'Kiwi Brown' or 'Draught', hugely popular in New Zealand for decades. (pp. 31-32)*

Compared to 'kiwi draught', Victorian mild was a big beer. However, the character of mild ale in the UK underwent significant changes throughout the twentieth century, and these may have mirrored changes that occurred in other commonwealth countries. Examining this history will allow us to see the link between these two styles.

## **Mild in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

By the Edwardian period, the colour of mild ale was darker than it had been 50 years prior, and the strength of the beer had been reduced with original gravities closer to 1.050 to 1.055 (Pattinson, 2014, p. 101). It's unclear why mild was brewed to a darker hue, although Pattinson suggests that the increased use of glass drinking vessels may have played a role:

*Sugar was the key to another significant change in mild ale toward the end of the nineteenth century: a gradual darkening of the color. Why this happened is a bit of a mystery. Possibly it was a result of the move to glass drinking vessels [...] As a darker color was associated with a stronger beer, it may have started as an attempt [to make the beer more attractive to the*

*price-conscious customer]. Rather than using dark malt, the color was mostly derived from dark sugar such as No. 3 invert or caramel (p. 101)*

Mild ale transformed quite dramatically throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the start of the first world war, mild was often dark amber, and from 1917 the strength decreased further due to war time restrictions, getting as low as 1.025 by 1918 (Pattinson, 2014, p. 102). By the 1920's the restrictions on brewing materials had been lifted, and the average gravity of rose to 1.043, only to dip again due to economic pressures as the century progressed (ibid., p. 103). By the 1950's mild was typically dark or pale, but rarely amber, and less than 4% ABV(Pattinson, 2011, p. 12).

Whilst mild remained a popular drink throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its universal appeal was in decline. A lighter, less alcoholic version of pale ale, marketed under different names such as 'light dinner ale' or more mysteriously 'AK' had become popular during the latter years of the 1800's. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the popularity of these Light bitter beers continued to grow:

Pale ale remained an expensive niche product until the introduction of cheaper bitters toward the end of the century. Only in the 1900's did bitter really become a drink of the masses [...] By 1910 Bitter was snapping at the heels of mild [in total volume brewed]. Between the wars, Bitter takes the lead (Pattinson, 2011, p. 70).

20<sup>th</sup> Century Mild ale was a session beer, meaning that it was intended to be drunk in comparatively large quantities over the course of an evening. Its low alcohol content and cheaper price made it a popular choice for people who wanted to enjoy a few pints without getting drunk (Sutula, 1999, p. 47). Pale, carbonated lager beer was heavily promoted during the latter half of the century and this, along with a sustained popularity in Bitter, further decreased interest in mild. As the beer market became more diverse many drinkers began to view mild ale as old-fashioned and bland (ibid).

Despite its decline, mild ale has enjoyed a modest revival, thanks to the activity of the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) which promoted traditional cask conditioning and cellaring techniques. CAMRA's investment in mild (such as the 'Mild May' promotion) has gone hand-in-hand with increased interest in the preservation of traditional brewing techniques and the 'craft' of brewing traditional ales in the UK (CAMRA, n.d.; Clissold, 1997). In other parts of the world, including New Zealand, mild has occasionally made an appearance as a welcome alternative to pale, hoppy beer. A good example being Mike's Mild Ale brewed since 1989 in Taranaki (Tyack, 1999, pp. 63-64; 2005, pp. 49-50).

While it's unlikely that mild ale will ever regain the widespread popularity it once enjoyed, its enduring appeal shows that there is still a place in the beer world for sessionable, easy drinking beers.

## References

- Arnold, J. (n.d). *Maris Otter*. Robin Appel Ltd. Retrieved 7th April from
- Brown, P. (2004). *Man Walks into a Pub: A Sociable History of Beer*. Pan Books.
- CAMRA. (n.d.). *Mild Month*. Retrieved 12th April from
- Clissold, I. (1997). *The Camra Guide to Cellarmanship* (1st ed.). CAMRA Books.
- Cornell, M. (2010). *Amber Gold & Black* (1st ed.). The History Press.
- Cornell, M. (2013, 15th April). Revival of ancient barley variety thrills fans of old beer styles. . *Zythophile*.
- Cornell, M. (2019, 28th May). Malt Geezers: in which we look at everything from an Anglo-Saxon maltings to the most modern bit of malting kit in the country *Zythophile*.
- Hieronymus, S. (2012). *For the Love of Hops: The Practical Guide to Aroma, Bitterness and the Culture of Hops*. Brewers Publications.
- Mallett, J. (2014). *Malt: A Practical Guide from Field to Brewhouse*. Brewers Publications.
- Mosher, R. (2004). *Radical Brewing: Recipes, Tales, and World-altering Meditations in a Glass*. Brewers Publications.
- [Record #12 is using a reference type undefined in this output style.]
- Pattinson, R. (2011). *Mild! Plus*. Kilderkin.
- Pattinson, R. (2014). *The Homebrewer's Guide to Vintage Beer*. Quarry Books.
- Pattinson, R. (2022, 20th January). London X Ales 1880 - 1899. *Shut up about Barclay Perkins*.
- Steele, M. (2012). *IPA: Brewing Techniques Recipes and the Evolution of India Pale Ale*. Brewers Publications.
- Sutula, D. (1999). *Mild Ale: History, Brewing Techniques, Recipes*. Brewers Publications.
- Tyack, K. R. (1999). *Guide to Breweries and Beer in New Zealand*. New Holland Publishers.
- Tyack, K. R. (2005). *New Zealand Beers: A Tasting Guide*. Penguin Books.
- White, C., & Zainasheff, J. (2010). *Yeast: The Practical Guide to Fermentation*. Brewers Publications.