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# Stop eating my cake!

Guest Shot / By Colby Cox Jul 26, 2017



I once heard an interesting metaphor: Two groups were involved in a lengthy negotiation that was growing increasingly contentious. In a meeting, the purpose of which was finding common ground, one person at the table suggested: “It’s as if we are in a discussion about how to divide a

cake, but while we are arguing over where to make the cut, you are eating the cake.” I can’t help but think about this allegory every time I open my inbox and see that yet another craft brewery has abandoned its roots and sold out to a corporate behemoth.

During the robust craft beer revolution of the ’90s I witnessed a period of enlightenment, a new level of beer consciousness that could never be undone. It was a brilliantly exciting time when opportunity and possibility appeared endless. Industry mavens like Sam Calagione, Ken Grossman and Jim Koch were challenging the tyrannical beer establishment and proclaiming our emancipation from the enslavement of flavorless malt beverages. It was a noble cause that I respected and embraced at an impressionable age.

Recently, however, the battle lines have been shifting, and a mutiny within the ranks is unfolding. Craft breweries across the country are selling out to the faceless, soulless entities that have traditionally used every resource available to thwart the progress of independently owned craft breweries. It is a paradox of grand proportion, and the consequences are potentially grave for those of us trying to grab the torch of craft beer and leave a vibrant legacy for the next generation of innovators and entrepreneurs.

Victory will be won or lost over the questions: What is craft beer? And why does the independence of a brewery matter?

For those of you who think I’m grandstanding, I beseech you: Beware the pitfalls of complacency. If you have had the pleasure of enjoying a citrusy Imperial IPA, a barrel-aged sour or anything other than an American light lager over the past several years, you need to thank your local independently owned craft brewery.

Despite what gazillions of dollars in ad spending might suggest, the rise of craft beer in the U.S. happened in spite of the best efforts of international super-conglomerates to keep independent products off the shelf.

Now they are buying every craft brand they can get their hands on, flooding the market with their value-engineered products and hoping you won’t notice. They want you to think that the macro-owned six-pack you picked up yesterday is still brewed in small batches down the street.

Their strategy hinges upon the belief that people don't care about where their beer comes from, who makes it and why. Success would mean getting back to the business of making tasteless beer from rice and corn, so they don't have to mess with the complexity of widespread consumer choice any more.

In the midst of all this I find myself processing an emotional cocktail of melancholy and nostalgia. Much like the feeling I had when I discovered that my parents were responsible for stuffing the presents under our tree every Christmas, I am glad I am no longer being deceived, but I will miss the comfort and innocence of my ignorance.

So many of the anti-establishment brands that inspired me to start homebrewing years ago are now just portfolio investments for multibillion dollar Goliaths.

Independent craft breweries, the titans of innovation, are facing their most existential threat since the 18th Amendment. The future of craft is uncertain and there is no rule book, but as someone once said, awareness breeds choice, and choice breeds commitment.

To save ourselves we must bring awareness to what is happening and give people the information they need to make informed decisions.

Fortunately, the Brewers Association launched a campaign to give the power back to us, the manufacturers, purveyors and consumers of truly independent and truly craft beer. They have created a "Certified Independent Craft Brewery" seal, available to all qualifying breweries to make clear the distinction between the products we love and respect, and everything else. This differentiating mark will allow consumers to easily identify the breweries that buy locally, hire locally and invest locally.

It will give us all a critical tool in making informed purchasing decisions that support the craft breweries that remain steadfast in fighting the good fight, in deference to artisan craftsmanship. It is a way for us to know exactly who is trying to eat our cake, so that we can smack their gluttonous hands away from what is rightfully ours.

For all of you who love great beer, here's to fighting for a future where independence matters!  
Cheers.

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