**On-Trade Chronical – Dec 21**

Looking ahead to 2022

What’s the old cliché’, something about the only constant is change? Well, we are certainly living in these times now! As I write we are now awaiting new instructions from the boffins and Boris as to what the next moves are to combat Omicron. This will no doubt extenuate the nervousness of the public’s use of the pubs which, as already well publicised, are suffering from cancelled Christmas parties etc, but I want to look past the current crisis and into the future.

And I mean crisis, as I believe that there will be quite some reckoning in the early part of the New Year. For those of us who do manage to survive, the recent restrictions on pubs have change the style of service offered and have also changed the way customers think about and use the pub, which is a bit of a worry to me. Of course, everything I am about to say must be on the understanding that we will eventually get past the pandemic but I sincerely hope the majority of pubs can survive!

I have noticed that there is a propensity for customers who have to book tables and are discouraged not to dwell at the bar which is, of course, exactly where many of the decisions of what to drink are made. So, the groups arrive in groups, stay as a group, and leave as a group and don’t intermingle which, to me, is the very essence of a public house. Yes, I understand there is the ease of not having people pushing and shoving at the bar, especially for the team working behind it, but because of this there is a massive drop in the spontaneity of popping in for a drink to see who’s there or to catch up with a mate or indeed to ask a local to do a job for them. I do think we need to re-emphasise this aspect of ‘the local’ and think of ways to re- invigorate this aspect of the pub. The ‘early doors’, on your way home or the attitude adjuster with the diverse group of locals is a great institution that must be maintained together with the extraordinary and massively undersold charitable contributions that the local pubs raise on an annual basis. To me it is an easy fix to reiterate the important of intermingling at the bar or the ‘pop in for one’, but it does require focus and the ever-imaginative effort from the teams in the pubs, I am not sure that this particular point has been noticed nor the understanding of how important this is to the health and wealth of pub life.

This brings me to another point. The woes of cask ale with the recently published 17% decline (BBPA) it appears that cask ale is in terminal decline however, personally, I think it is not. Great cask ale is without a doubt the finest long alcoholic drink. A pub with a reputation for great cask ale is as popular and busy now as it has ever been. The beauty of fresh cask ale, the depth of flavour and the variety, let alone the natural ingredients and generally with local breweries the low carbon footprint it should be recognised for what it really is… Perfection!

However, this is not my overall point. With my view above about the lack of people at the bar, going straight to tables or not being inside the pub, there is little to promote what’s on in terms of cask. A drinks menu hardly sells cask in a good light and is often out of date or simply says selection of casks – Hardly the best way to sell such a naturally beautiful beer. As customers don’t know what’s on the bar there is a tendency to revert to safety with standard keg beers which then adds the downward spiral of cask turnover, a rising of the publicans concerns about wastage, the reduction in offer or the removal of cask altogether. What’s needed is some simple tricks. Photos of the handpulls on the bar teams tablets or a QR code leading straight to the selection with a simple description by the team of the beers. Taste testers (Cask Marques try before you buy) and a selection that appeal to all could also be a new way to improve the cask situation.

Not everyone wants the sip and savour beer, I personally get annoyed when cask beer is constantly changing as all I want is a regular easy drinking 3.5% to 3.8% session beer. Would a lager drinker like a constantly changing session lager? Most likely not. I noted the Glynn Davis article in Propel over the weekend, which again highlights the perils of cask, but I would like to challenge that price is the only way to sell cask. Yes, there are the traditionalist who remember when the new ‘fancy lagers’ were being priced much higher than ‘beer’, but the market and the times have most definitely moved on. The effort, the skills, the time, and the management of cask ale in the pub, to my mind, definitely demands a premium. How often do you hear a Guinness drinker specifically ask for the price of a pint before they order one? Not that often, as they know it’s probably one of the most expensive drinks on the bar, but they are not so much interested in the price, it’s all about the quality of the beer and the theatre of pour. I will advocate that cask is in the same category. As a group we cask ale drinkers, (note, I include myself) are particularly vocal, and possibly selfish, when asked which pubs to go to. Generally, the cask ale drinker will shout, whinge, whale to ensure we go to the pub with the best cask ale! Hence why a pub with good cask ale is as busy as ever. Well, that’s certainly the case near here!

As an aside, I’d like to make one last point. I am probably way out of date, and most of you may well have seen it already but has anyone seen the London show, ‘The Choir of Man,’ a musical production in The Art’s Theatre, London? If you haven’t then it is an absolute must for anyone who works in the drinks industry. It most certainly needs the support from all of us in the industry and is without doubt the best advert for the public house. No spoiler alerts required as I am not going to give you the story, except, not that I go very often at all, it is the best show I’ve seen since ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’. It’s a very reasonable ticket price in one of the smallest theatres in London, but wow it packs a huge punch. You can even enjoy a beer at the bar on stage with the cast before it starts, so get there early!

Wishing you all a very happy Christmas and the best festive season you can under the circumstances!

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