



Have yourself a merry cask-mas

Christmas is perfect for cask ale, a time when it can showcase its array of styles and food-matching qualities, and ease those awkward family bonding moments. **Pete Brown** extols its virtues

Whatever your religious beliefs may be, Christmas is a true triumph of the human spirit.

Just about every culture on the planet that endures long, dark winters has some version of a festival of light, and ours predates any associations with Christianity.

At a time when the trees are bare and the earth is barren, we drag evergreens into our houses and stock up with rich food. When the year is at its darkest, we put up strings of extra lights and fill the house with garish colours. And when other mammals hibernate, hoping to survive the worst, we throw open our doors and invite friends and family in, lavishing them with hospitality we can scarcely afford.

Essentially, the whole thing is a massive V-sign to cruel winter, a perverse declaration that we're not just going to survive it: we're going to party. We spend time with our fami-



Seasonal cask ale: there are hundreds of festive brews on offer annually

lies. We remember old traditions and invent new ones. We over-indulge. And the special part is, we know that millions of other people across the world are doing the same things as us, at the same time.

Yes, it may be fashionable to pre-

tend we hate all this – like we're somehow above it. And yes, it's over-commercialised and anyone that airs a Christmas ad or puts up decorations before mid-November should be publicly flogged, or at least forced to eat sprouts every day of the year.

But anyone who doesn't honestly have at least a sneaking affection for falling asleep in front of the telly wearing a slightly torn party hat has a heart of stone.

All this feasting and merry-making gives cask ale its greatest potential showcase of the year. For many different reasons, everything aligns neatly to make Christmas the perfect cask moment.

Cask ale is seasonal; more people switch to drinking it during winter; and Christmas is winter's biggest drinking occasion.

The celebratory atmosphere, parties, dinners and time off work mean that more people are in the local pub at the time when cask ale is at its most attractive.

There's a key dynamic going on for occasional drinkers too. The majority of cask drinkers treat it as an occasional indulgence, something for the odd beer festival or trip to the



Bonding time: beer is the ideal drink to foster a convivial family atmosphere

country pub. But another key occasional cask moment is when families come together. Research for the *Cask Report* shows that many younger drinkers, who normally stick to lager or wine, often switch to cask for those rare moments when they bond

with dad over a pint.

Christmas is also when cask ale itself has a bit of fun, and shows just how seasonal it can be.

We've talked a great deal about seasonality and occasionality in recent *Cask Matters* features. Christ-

mas is when they combine to demonstrate the full range of cask's flavour and character.

There are, literally, hundreds of Christmas ales available. Some are dark and rich, perfect for drinking by an open fire when the nights are

long. Others go further and are brewed with added spices or other flavourings that evoke the festive larder, such as cinnamon, nutmeg or molasses. And the pumpclips for these limited-edition beers brighten up any bar. ▶

Case study: the Woolpack, Buckingham

Running a winter beer festival

The Woolpack, in the market town of Buckingham, first ran its winter beer festival in 2010 and the event continues to go from strength to strength.

The Enterprise lease already had a strong focus on cask ale, is Cask Marque-accredited, and wanted to replicate the success it had with its summer beer festivals.

Assistant manager Alex Smith says he looks to source Christmas ales from as many local breweries as possible, alongside more familiar national beers.

This year the pub has installed extra handpumps in anticipation of increased customer demand. Two permanents on the bar are Tribute and Doom Bar, alongside four rotating guest beers, plus

two straight from the cask during festival time.

Favourites include Hook Norton Brewery's Twelve Days and XT25 from microbrewery XT, described as a "rose red festive beer".

Although Smith admits they don't achieve a great GP on drink as they are tied for beer, he hopes to bump up profits with additional food and soft-drinks sales. "We will



offer a bigger bar snack menu and sharing platters to encourage families and groups to eat," he says.

The pub has teamed up with the local acoustic club to provide music throughout the festival and is using the town's Christmas parade to encourage more people to visit the pub. The parade acts as a showcase for local businesses and is a great marketing

opportunity, adds Smith.

Trade at the Woolpack is currently up a healthy 50% year on year and Smith is hopeful of maintaining momentum during December. "Last year we found that people who had visited the pub for the festival came back in January and February and provided an uplift for the quiet start to the year," he says.

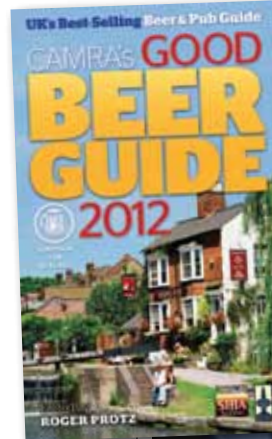
In terms of advice to other publicans considering running a festival, Smith urges them to bite the bullet and jump in. "Brief staff so they are confident in their knowledge about what beers you are selling," says Smith. "Push the event hard to the local community and get a good range of Christmas beers on the bar from local and national brewers. We have found that the lower ABV beers tend to sell better."

ASK ABOUT CASK

Q. How do I get my pub into CAMRA's Good Beer Guide?

A. Each CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) branch has an allocation as to the number of pubs it can nominate. In most branches members vote for their favourite pub. Therefore, it is important to contact your local branch and invite members to the pub.

Offer to host a CAMRA meeting. Listen to advice the group offers. To encourage new drinkers, offer a 10% discount on the presentation of a membership card – you can run this offer on a quiet night. Advertise in the local magazine or advertise CAMRA events in your pub. More than 50,000 guides



January boost: events and activities will help to draw in more people

are sold each year, so CAMRA's seal of approval is the sign of a quality pub.

Q. How do I create a busy pub in January?

A. Events and activities are key to persuading your Christmas customers to return in January. Here are some suggestions:

- Quiz/promotional night supported by a brewery, with prizes and money off a pint.
- Winter beer festival.
- Free pint offer with a voucher given to customers who spend money with you in December.
- 'Meet the brewer' night.
- Food offer/voucher for customers who eat in your premises in December.

Email your questions to caskmatters@wrbm.com
Answers supplied by Cask Marque

Cask Comment Andy Slee



Why Punch & CAMRA share a love of beer

An unexpected thing happened recently... I heard Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) chief executive Mike Benner speak – and I agreed with most of what he said.

Punch and CAMRA haven't been natural bedfellows over recent years and it strikes me that, while there will always be points of disagreement, we have far more in common than often meets the eye.

At their core, both organisations have a love of good beer served in pubs at the heart of their local communities.

Leased and tenanted pubs sell proportionately more cask beer than pubs in any other part of the market. Punch sees cask as a huge point of difference against the managed pub chains and, more importantly, the supermarkets.

On average, our pubs have access to more than 100 different brands supplied directly from us, with our busier sites having access to the Society of Independent Brewers' direct delivery scheme. If that's not enough, our pubs can opt for an agreement that allows not just one, but multiple guest ales, completely free of tie.

In addition to these changes, record numbers of our sites have been Cask Marque-accredited and feature in CAMRA's *Good Beer Guide*. Punch helps run more than 500 beer festivals annually and we have made significant



CAMRA: promoting good beer

innovations in our rotational cask-ale scheme, *Finest Cask*.

We are delighted that more than 40,000 people visited our CAMRA-endorsed promotional website during Cask Ale Week, which generated extra business in 800 *Finest Cask* pubs.

That said, beyond the perennial issue of cellar management, what is the biggest issue facing cask beer? Simple. For all of the goodwill that range-broadening has delivered, somewhere the message of what makes a successful range seems to have been lost.

Typical of my recent experience was a pub I visited with 10 handpulls – all of which were on constant rotation. The most a single brand sold at any time was one firkin. When I asked why, I was told: "It's what people want." But do they?

The beauty of cask is its widening appeal, away from middle-aged men and towards 18 to 24-year-olds and women – attracted initially by golden ales and other lighter beers.

Pubs should appeal to 'occasional' or new cask drinkers who tell us they prefer brands they recognise. With a pint now costing £2.75 on average, it is a big ask to present someone with a range of unfamiliar brands, especially as the reason they may well be trying cask is the advertising for one of the market leaders.

Research I read recently suggested pubs that stock a nationally recognised brand as part of a range take around £6,000 per annum more than the kind of pub I visited. That's £6,000 from always stocking one or two of the major brands that make up half of the cask-ale market, as well as regional and local ales.

In these challenging trading times I've yet to visit a pub that can turn down that kind of money.

Andy Slee is Punch Buying Club director for Punch Taverns with a remit that includes development of cask beer in 4,500 pubs



Perfect match: beer is the best drink to complement the complex flavours of the traditional Christmas meal

No other drink has the breadth, range, flexibility and playfulness that enables it to get into the Christmas spirit as much as cask can. It is a scandal that every year, national newspapers that claim to be passionate about seasonality, local sourcing and traditional methods and ingredients ignore beer when they recommend wines for Christmas that are available all year round.

But apart from limited-edition seasonal beers, Christmas is when cask ale is able to showcase its full array of styles. The depth of winter is also the time for old ales, big, warming barley wines and indulgent imperial stouts (most of us don't have to get up for work the next day).

These chewy, grown-up beers are for sitting, sipping and contemplating. And if anyone should cry in horror at the 8% ABV or 10% ABV tag, it's worth reminding them that this is still considerably lower than wine or spirits, and no-one is suggesting you drink these beers by the full pint.

The other beer styles in cask ale's armoury have a role to play too. A best bitter of around 4% ABV is a perfect pacer for people partying with intent, a responsible choice when others are drinking stronger brews. Hoppy pale ales and IPAs provide quenching palate-cleansers.

And the new wave of lower strength beers really comes into its own. Many breweries have responded to the lower rate of duty for beers of 2.8% ABV or below, and

“ Apart from seasonal beers, Christmas is when cask ale is able to showcase its full array of styles

some of these are more enjoyable than you might think. Even without going that low, mild is typically 3% ABV to 3.4% ABV. Trinity, a new pale ale by London brewer Redemption, is a mere 3% ABV.

Many people first try this beer because they don't want a big alcohol hit, and then continue drinking it by choice simply because it tastes so good. As the pace of experimentation in cask ale shows no sign of slowing, there are sure to be more of these beers available this year than ever before.

These lower strength ales play a useful role over the festive period, providing a gentle return to the pub for those feeling the effects of the night before. They allow pubs to demonstrate a responsible-drinking option, teeing them up nicely for the traditional January detox period that's about to follow.

Finally, there's no better opportunity than Christmas to try some beer and food matching. There are two key facets to a Christmas dinner with all the trimmings that make it perfect for cask.

Firstly, everyone knows what it is, and everyone expects the same. One of the key barriers to beer and food matching is a simple lack of knowledge – both publicans and punters can be unsure where to start.

Christmas dinner is unique in that we (mostly) all eat the same thing across the country over the same period. Basically, we know what we're dealing with.

Secondly, the heady mix of different stuffings, trimmings and sauces on the plate presents an indulgent riot of flavour that no single wine could ever hope to truly pair with. But that full range of cask ales on the bar holds the answers.

Hoppy pale ales are perfect with a seafood starter, for example. IPAs or premium bitters have the body, depth and complexity to handle all the spices and seasonings of the main event. And if you can't get hold of one of the beers that are specifically designed to pair with the flavours of Christmas pudding, a heady old ale, vintage ale or barley wine is simply bliss.

A half-pint with each course (served in elegant, stemmed glassware, of course) provides a perfect enhancement to the big meal of the year, and is a lot less boozy than wine with each course.

There simply is no better drink than cask at Christmas, and no better time to showcase cask. Christmas is supposed to be jolly, merry, cheerful and convivial, not a drunken riot. And these are the values that cask ale – and the pubs that serve it – have at their heart.

How to... prepare staff for Christmas

Christmas is a time when a great many non-pubgoers decide to venture out and sample the pub experience.

This is the perfect opportunity to showcase your pub in the best possible light, and encourage these occasional visitors to return at other times of the year.

You have probably spent a lot of time choosing a festive cask-ale range, getting them fully conditioned and of perfect quality, ready to serve to guests. So now is the time to get your staff prepared by following this five-point plan:

1. Glassware

Make sure staff know to pick a clean, cool, dry and preferably branded glass for cask ales on the bar. A hot glass will cause beer to fob, the head to collapse, and the liquid to warm up in the glass.

Make sure all staff know they need to use a fresh glass for every customer (not re-use a glass that a customer brings back). If you have ordered in extra glassware for the festive period, ensure all new vessels are 'renovated' before use as they are covered in residues left by the manufacturing process.

Fill a clean glass with water to the brim, empty the water out, and keep the glass inverted under a bright strip light. If the water runs off in a continuous stream and coats the glass in an unbroken film, it is 'fit to fill'. If the water 'breaks up' (like rain on a car windscreen that has just been waxed), there are residues on the glass that need to be removed.

2. Product knowledge

Out of all the drinks categories on the bar, cask ale is the one that most barstaff haven't tried – and they may have misconceptions



Next month's *Cask Matters* will look at planning for the year ahead and building your cask business

about who the cask drinker is.

Ensure all cask ales have some simple tasting notes behind the pumpclip, enabling staff to describe the colour, flavour and ABV of the product. Tasting notes for more than 1,400 cask beers can be found on the Cyclops Beer website (www.cyclopsbeer.co.uk). Encourage staff to try a sample of the beers you stock and they will then feel confident to recommend a beer to people.

3. Perfect serve training

All that hard work you carry out in the cellar can quickly be undone when the cask ale is dispensed. Put aside 15 minutes to conduct a short training session, demonstrating how the beer should be poured. If time is at a premium for you, get staff to take some online training (perfect serves will be covered in more detail in a future article).

4. Food and beer matching

This is a growing area in the pub trade – matching menu items to cask ales on the bar. The benefit for you is that the more staff recommend a cask ale with food, the more throughputs increase.

The advantage for the guest is that it offers them choice – so many pubs are confident recommending a wine to go with food, but things aren't quite the same with beer. If you want to find out more about which brews go with which foods, take a look at the Beer Genie website (www.beergenie.co.uk).

5. Customer service

One of the biggest gripes for customers in pubs is the level of service they receive. Yes, it's an extremely stressful time of year with lots of staff working long, unsociable hours, but their role is to create a pleasant, enjoyable, festive environment. If they're not doing that, it reflects badly on the pub.

Every staff member represents you and the ethos behind your business – a good attitude and a welcoming smile costs nothing, yet it is invaluable.

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