

BY PETER V.K. REID

Fuller, Smith & Turner is one of Britain's great independent breweries. It's the sort of family-owned regional brewery that's quite uncommon in the United States and an endangered species in Britain as well. Just as most American regionals dropped by the wayside in the '60s and '70s, British regional breweries have had a tough go in recent decades. The managers of U.S. regional firms would recognize the trends—the rise of brewing conglomerates and flood of mass-market lagers.

For Britain's ale brewers, the latter has been especially pernicious. Ale consumption has been declining, and shipments of foreign-spawned lager beers have been on the rise. The big U.K. brewers have gravitated towards brewing lager beers and lighter ales in order to compete, leaving a handful of stalwart regionals to serve the traditional ale market.

As British beer writer Roger Protz notes, "These are turbulent times for brewers, particularly those like Fuller's which do not have access to the cash reserves and borrowing power of the multinational companies which now control so much of the UK drinks industry. But true to its heritage, the company is thriving where others founder and fail."

Fuller's has thrived by building a loyal constituency among ale enthusiasts. This has enabled the company to bolster its barrelage. Where other regionals have fallen into decline, Fuller's production has steadily climbed in recent years, from 159,000 barrels in 1999 to 190.7 in 2003.

In Britain, ale consumers are a loyal lot, and they even have their own lobby, in the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA). CAMRA was founded in the early 1970s, when British ale consumers realized that their beloved cask-conditioned (or "real") ales were being marginalized.

Fuller's saw the nascent power of CAMRA early on, and worked to satisfy the organization's concerns. As it happened, Fuller's had introduced its Extra Special Bitter (ESB) around this time. ESB was soon discovered by the beer drinking populace, and became a CAMRA darling.

The rise of ESB, which became Fuller's flagship, helped bump Fuller's into the upper echelon of British regional brewers. Over the

At left: A chemist tests a batch of London Pride

Pride of London

Fuller's keeps the focus on traditional ales

years, Fuller's ESB has won the title of CAMRA's annual "Best Strong Ale" on at least seven occasions.

"Fuller's ESB made our name going back to the 60s," says Richard Fuller, sales director for the brewery. "When brands like Watney's Red Barrel began creeping in, CAMRA discovered ESB. And when ESB really took off, it created a whole category of ESBs. It is the bedrock of our existence, and it became the foundation of our American business."

If ESB was the brewery's saviour in the 1970s, today's champion is London Pride. "London Pride was a small brand ten years ago, but in the past couple of years it has really taken off," Fuller says. "It is now sold in 9000-10,000 pubs, and we shipped 150,000 barrels of London Pride in 2003."

Brewmaster John Keeling says that Pride's drinkable profile has given the brand its broad appeal. "London Pride is where we are taking Fullers," he says. "It's got a malty aroma, but it's also got some hops, so it's nice and fruity, with a refreshing bitter finish. The hops are really the key to its drinkability, and it is meant for drinking pint after pint."

As Richard Fuller notes, session beers like London Pride are a hallmark of the British brewing tradition. "British brewers have really mastered flavorful, low gravity bitters meant for drinking," he says.

In addition to Pride, the company's other true session beer is Chiswick Bitter, a 3.5% abv ale that is named for the village (now suburb of London) where Fuller's makes its home. In the past, Fuller's also made other lower alcohol ales, including a dark mild called Hock.

ESB, the CAMRA favorite, comes in a notch higher than the session beers in flavor and strength. "ESB has a huge hop nose," Brewmaster John Keeling says, "It is London Pride's big brother, with more malt, more hops, and 5.5% abv. It has a nice bitter finish, more bitter than London Pride. We use Challenger and Target hops, just like London Pride. But, with the ESB, we also dry hop the cask with Goldings. It winds up at 32 IBUs [international bitterness units]."

The brewery produces some lower volume specialties, including a bottle-conditioned Fuller's vintage-dated "old" ale and the bottle-conditioned "1845." As the latter name implies, this is an attempt to recreate a 19th century Fuller's ale. "It was hard to replicate the roasted malt," says brewmaster Keeling, "but we found it in Scotland. It's a great looking beer that always generates a good head because of the yeast in the beer. It has a dry, fruity character, with 6.3% abv and 40 IBUs."

Fuller's also brews a traditional London Porter. "This is our stab at what a porter tasted like," Keeling says. "The flavor in porter comes from the roasted malt, and this gives these beers their bitter flavors. I think the addition of Fuggles hops in our porter rounds it out, and makes it less astringent.

"If you go back in time," Keeling continues, "It's interesting to examine why a certain beer was produced in a certain region.

much tankage was required for aging, and the demand for the company's ales was increasing. Going forward, management decided that the focus should remain firmly on ale.

Sales director Fuller says that he's confident that the brewery's ales, from ESB to Pride, can stand in any company. "We are now benchmark brewers in Britain," he says, "and we've got a reputation for brewing a higher quality beer in each style. We are very proud of our beers."



A brewery worker hauls kegs of Fuller's ale through the yard at the company's Chiswick brewery

You often find it comes down to the water, and London water is very good for making porter."

The Fuller's stable also includes a number of other interesting brews, including Fuller's IPA, Fuller's winter ale, Honeydew organic and the very strong Fuller's Golden Pride, which comes in at 8.5% abv.

When Fuller's revamped its brewhouse, one goal was to develop a lager brewing capability. Indeed, Fuller's brewed lager beers from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s, but the experiment came to an end in 1992. Too

And Fuller says he envisions new opportunities for ale. "I see beer taking its place at the dining table," he says, "It's an arena where I believe that Fuller's ales can rival wine."

Traditional ingredients

Fuller's ale pedigree starts with the ingredients. The water is drawn from Chiswick wells, and from the public water supply.

"The chemistry of water is easily understood," says brewmaster John Keeling. "The London water is not ideal for bitters, so

we 'Burtonize' it." (This is a process that alters a water profile to conform to the great ale brewing waters of Burton-upon-Trent).

The hops used are British, grown in the West Midlands and Kent. "Some brewers believe that whole hops are best, and I agree with them," Keeling says. "Whole hops make the best beer in the first months after the harvest, but not all year. Pelletization damages the hops a bit, but preserves them better. They

tuns. We didn't go to high-gravity brewing as some brewers did."

The brewers mash in at 5 A.M. every day. The grist is mashed with hot liquor and then transferred to a tun. The wort is then drawn off through perforated plates in the bottom of the tun, and pumped into a kettle for the boil.

Closed conical fermenting vessels replaced open fermenters in the early 1970s. Before the switch, achieving consistency could be tricky.

pallet kegs of pasteurized beer.

Pasteurized beer accounts for 13% of the brewery's production. The brewery sells 7% of its beer in bottles, and 80% as "real ale" with yeast still active and fermenting in the cask. According to the company, the rise in pasteurized keg beer is due to demand from smaller pubs, which may not be able to maintain cask beer in top condition. The brewery might also use the new line to keg beer under contract to other brewers.

As Fuller's modernizes its production capabilities and increases capacity, the company is aiming to build its presence in the American market.

The brand is now handled in the U.S. by Distinguished Brands International of Littleton, Colorado. Last year, Fuller's shipped 7,000 barrels to the U.S., and the importer has deployed new packaging and promotions aimed at increasing that number.

Richard Fuller is sure his family's ales will find favor on American shores. "Americans are more willing to experiment, and try new things," Fuller says. "When I grew up it was just mild or bitter, and your dad introduced you into the world of drinking. Now, in the U.S., we are seeing consumers trying all sorts of new things. American supermarkets stock a much broader range of beers than British supers."

American and British supermarkets may now be sales venues of choice, but Fuller's ale abides. There has been a brewery on the Fullers site since the 1500s. Some buildings on the property were built in the 1700s, and the climbing wisteria that covers the face of the brewery office dates from 1815.

The Fuller family bought an interest in the Chiswick brewery in the 1820s, but the early years were rocky ones. "Chiswick was a little village outside London," Richard Fuller says. "The brewery here in Chiswick had grown up over the years, and got into a desperate financial mess. My great, great grandfather put in some money, and then brought in his son and Smith and Turner in 1845."

The Fullers, Smiths and Turners have stuck with the business since 1845, so they obviously take the long view. And the current family managers, for their part, are committed to keeping Fuller, Smith & Turner an independent ale brewer.

"This is a historic site, and we make historic products," says Richard Fuller. "The brewery has seen huge investment in recent years, and we will gradually expand.

"As we go forward," he adds, "you can be sure we will continue to pursue both quality and capacity." ■



Curtain-sided trucks take Fuller's out into the trade. The brewery ships 11,000 kegs a week to regional draught accounts

are vacuum packed, and stored cold, which minimizes oxidation. Pellets also cut the storage space you need. To store whole hops, we'd need a hop room 15 times as large as the one we've got."

The old brewhouse included a rather elderly copper brew kettle. "The old copper was open at the top, so you'd just go up the ladder and throw in the hops," Keeling says.

This was decommissioned in 1986, and the new brewhouse is a study in modern stainless steel. "From 1863 to the 1980s, the brewery didn't put much investment in the brewhouse," Keeling says.

Two stainless mash tuns were installed in 1993. "A Victorian brewer might not recognize our mash tuns," Keeling says, "but we realized that the best Fuller's beer was made with mash

"It was very hard to control temperature in open squares," Keeling says. "We used to make quite different beers in summer and winter."

New and old fermenters were used side-by-side for several years in the early 1970s, until the last open square was decommissioned in 1976. About 80% of Fuller's output is draught beer, and the company sends out 11,000 kegs a week. "We are primarily a draught producer," Keeling observes.

In answer to rising demand, Fuller's has invested six million pounds in its brewery in recent years. Most recently, the company installed a new high-performance keg line made by KHS of Germany. The new system more than doubles the brewery's keging capacity, from 120 to 280 kegs per hour. The new equipment will clean, sterilize, fill and