

Educating palates to the wonders of cask-conditioned ale is an ongoing task, partly because people think of English-style beer as being flat, warm and cloudy. The reality is that properly handled cask-conditioned beer should be served star bright and feel cool on the palate with an underlying soft carbonation. Certainly, for some, drinking cask beer might be an acquired taste – but one worth making the effort, for the genuine delights of cask ale cannot be underestimated.

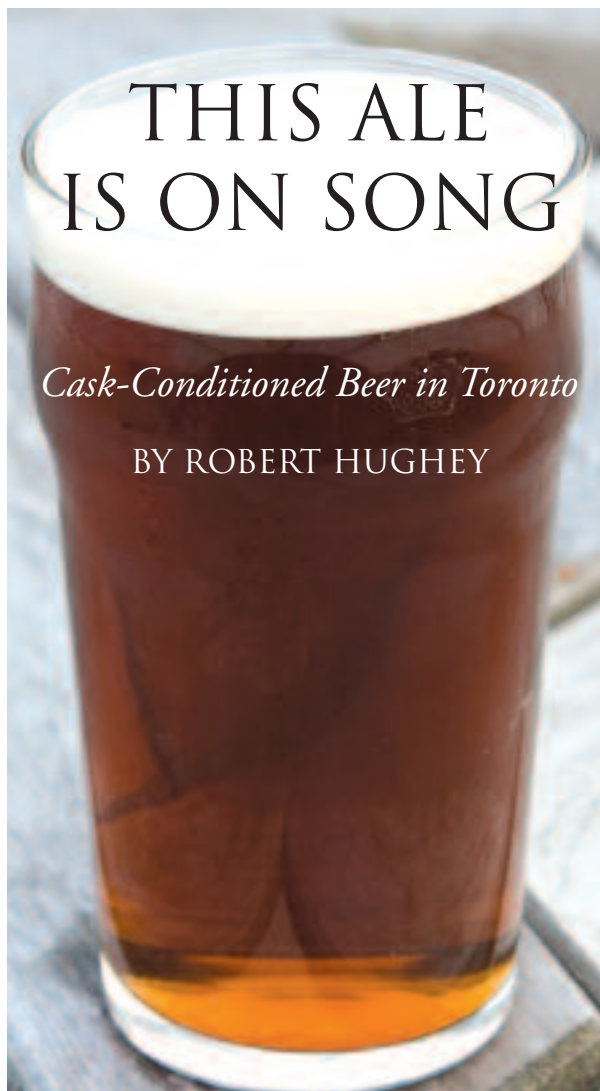
Cask-conditioned ale (also known as real ale) is beer in its purest form, as it used to be made and served before kegs and finely filtered cold beers became the norm. Made from four natural ingredients – water, barley malt, hops and yeast – cask beer is a living beer, with live yeast still active in the cask from which it is to be served. In the pub cellar, the cask beer undergoes an important secondary fermentation. It is during this period that the beer is naturally carbonated and comes into condition as a subtle bundle of flavour nuances is developed.

Because there is no artificial carbonation and no preservatives or additives, nothing but great flavour comes through in the glass. Served cool at a temperature in the range of 50°F to 55°F (10°C to 13°C), which is generally considered to be the cellar temperature of an English pub, cask ale delivers big time taste. Cask-conditioned ale is traditionally served by means of a hand pump or by gravity feed from a cask on the back bar.

From a brewery's perspective, the main problem with a living beer is educating its licensees on correct handling procedures, which has always been a bit of a headache in properly serving real ale to the beer drinker. This is perhaps the reason that the revival in Canada began at brewpubs, where the real ale can be looked after from brewing through to serving.

Historically, John Mitchell founded the Troller Pub and Horseshoe Bay Brewery in Horseshoe Bay, British Columbia in 1982, brewing the first cask-conditioned ale in North America. Mitchell teamed up with publican Paul Hadfield two years later to open the continent's second real-ale brewery, Spinnakers, in Victoria. Spinnakers is Canada's oldest surviving brewpub.

Down east, the Granite Brewery & Ginger's Tavern, a brewpub with several taps for real ale, opened in Halifax in 1985, with Kevin Keefe at the helm. Not far behind was the Wellington County Brewery in Guelph, Ontario, which was the first modern-day microbrewery in North America to brew cask-conditioned ale. It was founded in 1985



by Philip Gosling, with brewer Charles MacLean at the brew-house controls. MacLean brewed two cask ales, Arkell Best Bitter, a session bitter worthy of the name, and Wellington County Ale, a fuller-bodied ale with malt flavours and hop bitterness in abundance.

MacLean, who learned the trade at Godson's Brewery in London, England, was instrumental in reviving cask ale in Ontario. Not only did he brew new, wondrous, living beers, he also sold and serviced the beer engines so necessary to deliver a perfect pint to the bar. He also sectioned off pub cellars, building special beer fridges to accommodate the racks for the casks and the specific temperature needs of the casks. "Cask ale was the type of beer I was used to drinking in England. It was a mission to bring cask ale to Ontario beer drinkers," says MacLean.

Now head brewer at the F&M brewery in Guelph, Ontario, MacLean has steadfastly kept his hand in the real-ale market with his own brand, MacLean's Pale Ale, a malt-accented brew with a good dash of hops for balance. He is currently set to open MacLean's Ales near the town of Durham, again with cask ale firmly in mind.

Other first-generation pubs in Toronto that took cask ale in the mid-1980s include The Feather's, which is still going strong, the Duke of Kent, still open but no longer serving cask ale, and the Hop and Grape and Foster's, both of which have since closed.

As some Toronto pubs abandoned real ale or closed altogether, one publican saw a niche opportunity, which begat a second wave of interest that was sparked by the 1988 opening of C'est What, which serves up to five cask ales on tap on a rotating basis. The Granite Brewery, which opened in 1991 as a brewpub, boldly presented cask ales as the way forward, serving up such beery delights as Granite Best Bitter Dry-Hopped and later, Granite IPA, to great appreciation. The Granite has since changed its license to that of a brewery but still holds true to its origins; the difference now is that its cask ales can also be savoured at other pubs.

The Granite Brewery's Ron Keefe will tell you that, for him, the matter of brewing real ales came about as the result of a shortage of tankage and the need to move more beer into casks so he could add more beers to his range. It was an experiment that went exceedingly well. "For a good percentage of our customers, real ale is not an issue. They just like the beer," says Keefe. "But from a brewer's perspective,

Photo by Gordon Dixon, istockphoto.com

there are certain flavour profiles that you can get in a real ale that you can't get in other beers."

A few pubs and organizations have been instrumental in keeping real ale in the forefront of beer drinkers' minds. Bar Volo holds successful cask-ale events during the year and attracts new cask beers from Ontario's microbreweries each time out, resulting in brisk ticket sales and heightened media interest. The Victory Café added both summer and winter cask ale events. And a group called CASK! Toronto has been formed to raise awareness of cask ales, and has held a tasting event with cask ale and keg side-by-side to reveal the taste differences.

"We've stayed with real ale for so long because we believe it is beer in its purest form," relates Mike Stirrup, current head brewer and part owner of the renamed Wellington (formerly Wellington County) Brewery in Guelph.

The English have a number of sayings regarding cask-conditioned ale, or real ale, when it is in tip-top form: This ale is on song; The beer's in good nick tonight; or It's in good form. If you overhear any of these at a bar on either side of the Atlantic, don't hesitate to ask what the locals are drinking.

Try cask ale in Toronto at Bar Volo, the Victory Café, C'est What?, Granite Brewery and Mill Street Brewpub. And look for more about cask ales at www.casktoronto.wordpress.com. □

Robert Hughey is a beer writer and cask-ale drinker who has spent a good number of hours in pubs in many parts of England and in Toronto, all in the name of research about this, the most splendid of beverages. He has brewed cask ales at home and played host at cask ale parties, sharing his real-ale knowledge and pints with friends and family.



Cask Days at Bar Volo

Photo by Robert Hughey

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