

insidebeer

with Jeff Evans

Classic Beer of the Month

Hop Back Summer Lightning, 5%

Golden ale has been the big success story of British brewing in the last ten years.



Nearly every brewery now offers something blond and vivacious in its range but this is really a relatively new development.

Back in the 1980s, beers generally only came in various shades of brown. One long-standing exception was Boddingtons Bitter, the straw-coloured Manchester beer, but it took new beers, such as Exmoor Gold – first brewed in Somerset in 1986 – to wake drinkers up to the idea that beer really didn't have to be rather dark in colour.

Spotting the potential to convert lager drinkers, other brewers began to follow suit, not least Hop Back Brewery in Wiltshire, whose Summer Lightning first emerged in 1988.

The beer was conceived by brewery founder John Gilbert who wanted to create a strong(ish) beer that was not heavy, chewy or sweet.

Ignoring the crystal malt that so often gives that traditional brown colour to British ale, he selected simply pale ale malt and combined it with a couple of British hops, Challenger and Golding. For a name, he settled on the title of a PG Wodehouse book he'd been reading and called it Summer Lightning.

The beer made its debut at the Salisbury Beer Festival and never looked back. A year later, it collected a gold medal at CAMRA's Champion Beer of Britain awards. Golden ale was very definitely on the British brewing map.

Gold Rush

Since that time, the style has proliferated to the point where, since 2001, no fewer than seven of CAMRA's supreme champion beers have been golden in colour.

Summer Lightning itself has continued to enjoy success since its remarkable early triumph, winning CAMRA's Champion Bottled Beer title in 1997. That bottle-conditioned version is slightly different in just having the one hop – Golding – but is just as crisp and refreshing and, it must be said, equally duplicitous.

This is arguably the beer for which the term 'dangerously drinkable' was coined, its 5% ABV creeping up on you and whacking you from behind after you've downed a few pints thinking it a mere summer refresher.

Delicate honey and lemon/lime citrus notes fill the aroma. The taste is crisp and just on the bitter side with flavours of lemon and herbs before a dry, bitter, herbal-hoppy finish.

Keeping the alcohol content in mind as you sup, there is plenty of enjoyment to be had from a glass of two of this influential beer as it celebrates its 25th birthday.

