

Heather Ale - Fraoch Leann

Introduction

Heather Ale, believed to have been drunk since around 2000 BC and reputed to be one of the oldest styles of ales in the world, is beginning to enjoy a renewed interest since the re-introduction of the long forgotten style and art of making the brew a few years ago. Made from the flowering tips of wild purple heather, boiled with Scottish malts and wild myrtle leaves in order to extract the flavour and nectar, it has been described as being "Full and of Firm character with a Floral, Peaty Fruity aroma with a dry Wine-like taste."

History

2000 BC, The Isle of Rhum: *A Neolithic shard has been discovered by Archaeologists. It contains traces of a fermented beverage made with heather flowers.*

325 BC, Pictland: *More commonly the lands north of the Forth-Clyde valley where the Picts who were accomplished brewers. They brewed some awful grand drink they called "heather ale" from heather and some unknown kind of "fog."*

843 AD, Scots and Picts united: *The Scots King Kenneth MacAlpine defeated the Picts to form 'Scotland' or 'Alba' to the Gaels. Throughout medieval times many ceilidh stories mention the brewing and drinking of heather ale. This folklore includes the tale of a Highland clan warming heather ale over the fire on a cold night. The steam from the hot ale cooled against the stone roof and dripped into a drinking cup. Upon drinking the contents, the Gaelic clansmen exclaimed 'Uisge-beatha' convinced they had experienced the fabled "water of life". Uisge had been discovered that night. This word has since entered the English language as 'Whisky'.*

1707 AD, The Act of Union: *After centuries of war Scotland became part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Despite many wars of independence and Highland uprisings, Scotland had lost its freedom. Many atrocities were passed through Parliament during the 18th century, outlawed was the wearing of tartan, playing bagpipes and Highland gatherings. Lands*

were stolen from crofters, Gaelic was forbidden and clans were persecuted - a whole culture and way of life was virtually destroyed. An Act was passed which prevented brewers using any ingredients other than hops and malt. Hops cannot grow in Scotland (indeed there is no Gaelic word for hops) and heather ale was all but reduced to legend.

1809 AD: *In the Highlands and Western Isles the brewing of heather ale continued, as did the wearing of tartan and the Gaelic language. They held on to their traditions and customs including the manufacture of illicit "uisge-beatha".*

1775 AD, Whisky Distilling Legalised: *After many decades of illicit stills, the Glenturret Distillery in Perthshire becomes the oldest (authorised) distillery in Scotland. It was established in 1775 although illicit stills on the site date back to 1717. It is also one of the smallest, with only one pot still - the traditional method of making whisky.*

1880 AD, *Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a poem entitled "Heather Ale" - you can read this in the Poetry Section below.*

1986 AD, Heather Ale Revived: *In a Glasgow home-brew shop, a Gaelic-speaking Islander translated an old family recipe for "Leann fraoich" to Bruce Williams, the shop owner. He began the crusade to revive Scotland's brewing heritage by trying different varieties and quantities of heather flowers, making up batches and testing them on his customers. When the formula was perfected he began selling the brew as "Fraoch Leann" (heather ale).*

1992 AD, Heather Ale in Production: *The first twenty thousand pints were produced at a small West Highland Brewery in Argyll. Sales were restricted to six pubs due to the capacity of the brewery. In 1993, an agreement was reached with Scotland's oldest family brewers, Maclay & Co. at the Thistle Brewery in Alloa which allows Bruce Williams to brew larger quantities during the heather season (July to September). Into the boiling breo of malted barley, sweet gale and flowering heather are added, then after cooling slightly the hot ale is poured into a vat of fresh heather flowers where it infuses for an hour before being fermented in copper turns. Once the formula was perfected, Bruce began selling Fraoch throughout Scotland and England and it is now available internationally. Every batch is inspected and recorded for the Scottish Brewing Archive in*

Glasgow. Under supervision of The 'Scottish Office' in Edinburgh, the tradition and custom of brewing heather is protected, and Heather ale receives a "Certificate of Specific Character".

Ode to Heather Ale

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote the following poem with the sub-title "A Galloway Legend." It tells the fable of the loss of the Pictish formula for making an alcoholoc drink from heather.

Heather Ale

*From the bonny bells of heather,
They brewed a drink long syne,
Was sweeter far than honey,
Was stronger far than wine.
They brewed it and they drank it,
And lay in blessed swound,
For days and days together,
In their dwellings underground.*

*There rose a King in Scotland,
A fell man to his foes,
He smote the Picts in battle,
He hunted them like roes.
Over miles of the red mountain
He hunted as they fled,
And strewed the dwarfish bodies
Of the dying and the dead.*

*Summer came in the country,
Red was the heather bell,
But the manner of the brewing,
Was none alive to tell.
In graves that were like children's
On many a mountain's head,
The Brewsters of the Heather
Lay numbered with the dead.*

*The king in the red moorland
Rode on a summer's day;
And the bees hummed and the curlews
Cried beside the way.
The King rode and was angry,
Black was his brow and pale,
To rule in a land of heather,
And lack the Heather Ale.*

*It fortune'd that his vassals,
Riding free upon the heath,
Came on a stone that was fallen
And vermin hid beneath.
Roughly plucked from their hiding,
Never a word they spoke:
A son and his aged father -
Last of the dwarfish folk.*

*The king sat high on his charger,
He looked down on the little men;
And the dwarfish and swarthy couple
Looked at the king again.
Down by the shore he had them:
And there on the giddy brink -
"I will give thee life ye vermin,
For the secret of the drink."*

*There stood the son and father
And they looked high and low;
The heather was red around them,
The sea rumbled below.
And up spoke the father,
Shrill was his voice to hear:
"I have a word in private,
A word for the royal ear.*

*"Life is dear to the aged,
And honour a little thing;
I would gladly sell the secret",
Quoth the Pict to the King.*

*His voice was small as a sparrow's,
And shrill and wonderful clear:
"I would gladly sell my secret,
Only my son I fear.*

*"For life is a little matter,
And death is nought to the young;
And I dare not sell my honour,
Under the eye of my son.
Take him, O king, and bind him,
And cast him far in the deep;
And it's I will tell the secret
That I have sworn to keep."*

*They took the son and bound him,
Neck and heels in a thong,
And a lad took him and swung him,
And flung him far and strong
And the sea swallowed his body,
Like that of a child of ten;
And there on the cliff stood the father,
Last of the dwarfish men.*

*"True was the word I told you:
Only my son I feared;
For I doubt the sapling courage,
That goes without the beard.
But now in vain is the torture,
Fire shall not avail:
Here dies in my bosom
The secret of the Heather Ale."*

Wild Heather Ale (makes 30 pints)

Ingredients:

2.5 kg milled pale malted barley
250 g milled crystal malt
cold water
small pieces of fat (animal or vegetable)
8 large handfuls heather flowers
2 handful bog myrtle leaves
2 teaspoons baker's yeast or beer yeast
1 level teaspoon sugar or honey per 750 ml bottle

Method:

Put the milled pale malted barley and crystal malt into a 3 gallon jam or jelly pan. Mix with cold water, then add more water to cover grain and stir into a slack, sloppy mixture.

Heat very slowly, over 3 hours, until warm. Do not allow the temperature to go above 70 degrees centigrade - the use of a small piece of fat (animal or vegetable) will indicate the temperature: solid = cold, runny = warm, small beads = too hot.

If it gets too hot remove from heat and mix until cooler. Mix every half hour, removing the fat with a spoon each time whilst mixing.

Peg a coarse dishcloth over a second pan or bucket and strain out liquor, rinse the grains with several kettles of hot water and leave to drain. Boil this liquid for one hour with 5 handfuls of heather flowers and 1 handful of bog myrtle leaves.

Rinse the dishcloth and peg over the fermentation bucket, place 3 handfuls of heather and 1 of bog myrtle in the cloth and then pour the hot liquor over this into the bucket, make up the bucket to 30 pints with cold water and leave to cool to body temperature.

Add 2 teaspoons of baker's yeast or a sachet of beer yeast and leave for 6-8 days to ferment. (Adding more wild heather flowers will ferment the ale but the flavour will be more sour and wine-like.)

Once the ale has stopped fizzing pour it into returnable strong screw top lemonade or beer bottles (750ml). Add one level teaspoon of sugar or honey to each bottle, replace top and store in a cool place until clear.