



SISTERS ARE BREWING IT FOR THEMSELVES

Together, a new generation of women
brewsters are changing the face of
the beer industry

BY Norman Miller

united

Back when water supplies could be pretty yucky, a lot of people drank beer as a much safer option. And that beer was mainly made by women. In fact, women brewers—brewsters—remained in charge of our beer industries for centuries, up to the Industrial Revolution when Victorian societal constraints and growing industrialisation untied to push them out of the brewing front-line.

Now women are back at the helm at an ever-growing number of British brewers, large and small. People like Emma Gilleland, head brewer at major Midlands beer-maker Marston's since 2007, who was once described by the BBC as “the most influential woman in beer today”.

“When I took the role of head brewer at Marston's I was the first female head brewer in its 175 years—and the first female head brewer in England. But women have been brewing beer for a long time, and it's reported they invented beer,” says Gilleland. When she first entered the brewing industry 26 years ago, though, she didn't have much sisterly company. “I was one of just two women working in production at the time. But in the early 2000s that started to change.”



At the forefront of driving that change was Sara Barton, who set up her own brewery (aptly named Brewster's) in the Lincolnshire town of Grantham back in 1998. She's gone on to brew gold-medal winning beers, and in 2012 became the first woman to win the prestigious Brewer of the Year Award from the British Guild of Beer Writers.

“We were brewing a range of 'famous women in history' beers since around 2000,” says Barton. “Now, Mothership and other female-led breweries are following our lead. A lot of pubs now run female brewer beer festivals—hopefully inspiring more female drinkers to try beer and see it as a female-inclusive product.”

PERFECTLY EPITOMISING that female-inclusive idea is Jane Frances LeBlond's



Ruby red ale "Harper's Brewing Co." brewed by Marston's

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all-women brewing team at Mothership. Jane came indirectly to brewing via a career in graphic design which she entered partly because the idea of women having brewing careers just didn't seem viable at the time. But her interest had begun burning early, after a teenage summer wine-making job at Kent vineyard Chapel Down, when she “fell in love with the idea of fermentation”.

Jane took up brewing seriously by chance, after buying her husband a home-brewing kit that he left languishing until its use-by date. “So I brewed it!” As she became

increasingly involved in brewing at ever larger scales, it became a way to “sustain her identity” while dealing with the myriad stresses of raising young children. “Mothership began as an idea formed in the early hours of mornings, during long walks pushing a buggy round the park, snatching moments while babies sleep. Mashing in test brews at 5am and bottling after putting kids to bed.”

Beer and babies clearly can mix, as Mothership scooped a major industry award as Britain's most exciting new brewery within months of starting up in 2019. As well as



“WOMEN CAN FEEL THEY HAVE TO WORK TWICE AS HARD AS A MAN TO PROVE THEY ARE CAPABLE”

being an all-women brewing team, their range focuses on women in other ways too. A celebratory series of brews under the heading 'Extraordinary Women', for example, has kicked off with Codebreaker, a Double IPA dedicated to Joan Clarke, whose work in helping crack Germany's Enigma Code during the Second World War saved thousands of lives.

Sara Barton's Project Venus provided a further boost to Britain's brewsters. It was set up in 2011 to

provide a networking forum, and a chance to come together regularly to make collaborative craft beers with a 100 per cent female touch.

“At the time I launched there was no real talk about female brewers and their place in the industry,” says Barton. “I’d come across women brewers over the years just getting on with doing their job.”

So is there a different vibe when women brew together? “With all collaborations there's a great level of fun,” says Barton. “But I don't think it is too different... Maybe we're not as

competitive with each other—but that could be me using a stereotype!”

The diversity of the women in British brewing makes stereotyping the last thing you'd think of. Take Catherine Maxwell Stuart, 21st Lady of Traquair—and the only aristocratic lady brewer in the world. Catherine makes globally-celebrated beers from a grand 12th-century house on the banks of the River Tweed in the Scottish Borders. Not only is this the oldest inhabited house in Scotland, but a place that has hosted 27 Scottish kings and

queens—plus “the monarch who never was”, Bonnie Prince Charlie.

But today Traquair is known for the ales made in its tiny riverbank brewery. Using historic equipment, Catherine and her team produce bottled beers such as the House Ale and Jacobite Ale voted best of their type in the world—“poetry in a glass” as one US expert put it.

Research suggests a brewery was active here when Mary Queen of Scots visited in 1566—but by the 19th century it had fallen into disuse. Its very existence remained unknown

Left to right: Sara Barton, Jane Frances LeBlond, Catherine Maxwell Stewart

until Catherine's father, Peter Maxwell Stuart, stumbled upon the old oak mash tuns—brewing vats—and 19th-century wooden stirring paddles hidden in a long-overlooked outhouse in the early 1960s.

“When my father walked into the brew house it was just a repository for family junk and lots of old champagne bottles,” Catherine reveals. “We knew it must have been forgotten about because of all the copper—if anyone had known about that during the Second World War, it would have been taken off to be melted down for munitions.”

There was never much doubt about her brewing destiny. “My early memories are of helping my father when I was about ten,” she says. “It was a great treat to help cool the beer. I'd stand on ladders and stir with old wooden paddles. Then I was employed to clean out the vessels. I did a bit of everything... It was very much part of my growing up.”

While people like Emma Gilleland pioneered the breakthrough of women at major brewers like Marston's, Catherine's family were pioneers at the small-scale end. “Traquair was the pioneer of micro-brewing in Scotland,” Catherine says. “In 1965 nobody was remotely interested in this kind of beer—it was the time of the lager revolution. There was more interest in my father being the first to get a licence to brew in a private house!”

The blue blood pedigree in Traquair's DNA also gives rise to some regal irony. “We do a lighter ale called Stuart Ale for spring,” says Catherine. “We originally called it Royal Stuart—until the government said we weren't allowed to call it 'Royal'... Though we have better Royal Stuart connections than the present Royal family!”

In contrast to a Scottish aristocrat, is the former Colombian chocolate-taster brewing up a storm in Cornwall, Paola Leather. She's now quality manager at St Austell Brewery, after heading brewing teams at other producers including Skinner's, Camden and Brains.

Beer formed a backdrop to Paola's childhood, as her grandfather worked in a brewery back in South America. “I grew up in the Colombian capital of Bogota, and worked in quality control for a chocolate company and a coffee federation. I was always interested in how every small change during the production process could transform the final flavour of the product.”

Another fine British brewster hailing from foreign parts is Italian Alessandra Confessore. Now head brewer at Yorkshire's Ilkley Brewery, she explains that being a woman in a male-dominated industry hasn't always been easy.

“Women can feel they have to work twice as hard as a man to prove



Paola Leather

“IT WAS HARD TO BE CONFIDENT—PEOPLE AROUND ME THOUGHT THAT I WASN'T STRONG ENOUGH FOR A MANUAL JOB”

they are capable,” she suggests. “I met quite a lot of scepticism when I decided to study brewing—it was hard to be confident when people around me thought that I wasn't strong enough for a manual job!”

Like Paola, Alessandra believes tastes from her home country have informed her brewing. “Italy is a wine country—culturally we look for complexity and balance when we talk about taste. Taking a traditional style and trying to create this poetry of flavours is way more inspiring to me than using unusual ingredients.”

While research suggests that women may generally have more nuanced taste buds than their male counterparts, no-one I talk to really suggests that women have different tastes in beer to men. Instead, attitude has proved the most notable gender division.

“One of the biggest challenges years ago was the perception by women they do not like beer, when many hadn't even tasted it,” says Emma Gilleland.

Now women are not only tasting beer, but once again taking charge with making it. Welcome back, brewers! ■