

The pale golden liquid courses down your throat, slaking your thirst, renewing your spirit and loosening your tongue, but what on earth is...

LAGER?

Despite rumours that it's going out of style, around 120 million pints of lager are consumed in the UK every week. That's two pints each. We are the ninth



biggest consumers and the third biggest producers of the amber nectar. And while some tipplers are happy with a couple of halves in any one evening, others are happily chugging down eight pints of electric soup a night before going off for another couple to wash down the vindaloo. If you are what you eat (and by extension what you drink) then a number of young British males are, by volume, lager and little else. Where once it was slugs and snails and puppy dog's tails; they are now awash with a yellowish substance of which they have only the dimmest knowledge.

What is lager?

A rough straw poll taken on a recent stag weekend in Prague revealed that of the twenty lager drinkers, nay

louts, in the party, seven hadn't any idea; five thought it

was made from wheat and the rest just said grain 'we think.'

If you are a fan of the fizzy brew and get out quite a lot, you may be drinking twenty pints of it a week. Can you imagine swilling back any other liquid in that kind of quantity without knowing what it was? Large amounts of lager can make us feel violently ill but even then we don't query its content, we just gobble down some painkillers, have a bacon sandwich and wait for the pain to wear off before cheerfully going back for a gallon more of the stuff. In an ongoing experiment on our own bodies we routinely slosh down millions of pints of a highly familiar, slightly toxic yet unknown liquid.

What is your poison?

Lager, like darker beer is basically water, malt, hops and yeast. Malt comes from barley and barley is a cereal crop that isn't much use for making bread or cakes but is great for making beer. The barley is brought to the highest point of possible soluble starch content by allowing it to sprout roots - to germinate. The malster halts the grain's growth by heating it and a naturally occurring enzyme called diastase converts the starch into sugar, or maltose, which in turn converts yeast into carbon dioxide and ethyl alcohol.

Add water and bingo! Falling down liquid - but at this stage the mixture is sickly sweet so the brewer adds hops.

A relation of the marijuana plant, there are two types of hops - the bittering variety that counteracts the brew's sweetness and the aromatic type which give it its distinctive flavour and smell.

At this point the beer/lager brewing techniques diverge. Ale yeast ferments at the top of the vessel and becomes tasty more quickly (7 - 8 days). Lager yeast ferments at the bottom of the vessel over a period of 30 days (Stella Artois takes even longer). In fact the word lager derives from the German lagern which means 'to store.'

The question of additives is a thorny one: surprisingly quite large quantities of flaked rice can be found in Heineken, Budweiser and Fosters while Kronenbourg and Colt 45 use flaked maize instead.

The 'reassuringly expensive' and legendary high-octane Stella Artois boasts that it uses only malt and hops but there have long been dark mutterings about chemical additives, perhaps as the only way to explain the blistering hangovers and memory loss that many associate with it.

This allegation cannot be verified since lager manufacturers are not obliged to print the ingredients on their tins and brewers jealously protect their methods.

In Germany the Reinheitsgebot law forbids any additives to its lagers but in the US, the FDA has approved up to 59 of them. It is hard to establish what goes into lager in the UK but it is suggested that some brewers inject carbon-

ation and use artificial colouring and preservatives. Whatever goes into it, us Brits are oblivious; we know what we want and we know where to get it - and when this Friday night you and your garden furniture have to be rescued from the canal, you will at least know a little more about the reason why.

FACT FILE

Lager was invented by Bavarian monks about 500 years ago when they found they could produce a clearer brew by storing it during the summer in wooden casks in cold subterranean caves.

Germany and the Czech Republic are the biggest consumers of lager per head of population.

Kronenbourg used to be called Tiger Bock. It is a French beer with a German name owned by a British brewery.

Beer making may have originated 10,000 years ago in Mesopotamia. There is a Sumerian recipe for beer making that is 4,000 years old.

Beer is possibly a side product of bread making but it could be the other way round since the bread making process is far more complicated!