



THE ART  OF



CRAFT



In the drinks world at the moment, it's cool to be craft. Such is London's infatuation with it, that a stroll down virtually any street will reveal signs declaring the craft credentials of a bar's drinks-list or the ever-changing microbrews on tap at a busy boozier. In fact, you could very easily go for weeks without drinking anything else. **Ben Norum** takes a look at the craft revolution and tries to work out what it really means.

As a city, we're systematically banishing big brands in favour of sipping on locally-produced, small-scale gins such as Portobello Road or Jensen topped-up with artisanal tonic, or taking our Vodka Martinis with Sipsmith rather than anything more generic. We'll sink beers made in the converted back room of a pub and pair drinks with cured-on-site meats or home-baked sourdough before rounding things off with an espresso made from beans that are roasted round the corner.

It's not just the hip few either: figures across the UK show how big the little guys are becoming. The rise of craft gin brands – mainly in London – is cited as the reason for a growth in overall gin sales of around 12% last year, whilst craft beer sales were reported to have rocketed by over 70% around the same time.

CRAFTING A DEFINITION

While our crush on craft seems to continually grow, we're left firmly in the dark when it comes to defining it. The Oxford English Dictionary describes craft as "an activity involving skill in making things by hand", and "denoting or relating to food or drink made in a traditional or non-mechanized way by an individual or a small company". While this sets the tone for what we expect from craft drinks, it's far from flawless.

For a start, it must be questioned whether a craft drink really ought to be made 'by hand'. Technological advances mean that in many cases a better and more consistent product can be created by using machinery and computerised equipment, while modern health and safety guidelines would encourage as little human contact as possible. Likewise, there's a strong argument to say that the craft-tag should be extended to higher-volume products so long as the quality and ethos is there.

Nate Brown, Director of London Bar Consultants, who run the City of London Distillery Bar, is clear in his definition of what craft means and sees precise technology as contrary to what it's all about. "Craft production is an art not a science, there is beauty in inconsistencies, provided the quality is maintained", he tells us. He's also of the view that craft means small. "I would love to argue that 'craft' is scalable, but the reality is not so. Craft comes from an essence, a deep-rooted ethos that prides the product and design above costs and business."

Sam Lloyd, the festival manager of Craft Beer Rising, doesn't see size as standing in the way. "I don't think it has to strictly be associated with small companies. We have regional brewers such as Fullers who you could argue have been 'crafting' beers since the 19th Century.

After all, it was our traditional ale breweries that inspired the early American craft breweries that our own craft beer boom is now taking a lead from", he argues.

The inclusion of the word 'traditional' in the Oxford English Dictionary definition of craft is also problematic. Lloyd feels that craft beer is all about "freedom, creativity and flair in brewing" rather than sticking to any pre-set rules, and the same applies to other craft products. Newly-launched Chilgrove Gin, made in West Sussex, is the first gin to be produced in England using a neutral spirit distilled from grapes rather than cereals: it's not traditional, but it is otherwise an excellent example of a craft spirit and it would feel foolish to call it anything else. Chilgrove's founder, Christopher Tetley, feels that a craft spirit "requires three essential qualities: technical ability, a passion for the spirit itself, and a desire to advance", and that "the terms 'craft', 'traditional' and 'small batch' are all too easily mistaken for being the same thing. Craft is not about the size of production but rather about the human element behind the spirit".

TO REGULATE OR NOT TO REGULATE?

Whether there should be legal guidelines surrounding the use of the word craft is an industry hot topic. As Rebekkah Dooley, marketing manager at Portobello Road Gin, notes: "people care more now about the origins of what they're eating and drinking, so if something's 'small batch', 'craft', 'locally sourced' they're more likely to buy it. It should probably be monitored more closely and there should be restrictions placed on how you describe your brand".

The only logical way that this would work is by pinning a definition of craft down with regulation. In the US, this already exists for beers, where a craft brewery must be small (brewing fewer than six million barrels a year), independent (be less than 25% owned by a company that isn't a 'craft brewer') and traditional (use real ingredients and established brewing techniques) in order to carry that tag. While the logic behind this step can be seen, it's worth noting how little such guidelines actually say about quality – theoretically, a company could tick all the boxes in order to be able to use the craft term in the marketing without really caring about their product at all.

"Having the right philosophy is more important than an official definition", says Sam Lloyd of Craft Beer Rising, while City of London Distillery Bar's Nate Brown is adamant that the thought process behind regulation is "inherently contrary to that which makes 'craft' craft. There is no regimented definition of art. If there was, it wouldn't be art". We'll drink to that.