

PUMP FICTION



The Blasket Blonde-Foster's mystery has given Heineken Ireland boss Maggie Timoney a headache

Beer giants are accused of using crafty tactics to tap into the microbrewery boom. By Gavin Daly

Jamie Keough, an outgoing Texan, moved to Kenmare in Co Kerry with her husband, Paul, in 2014. She fell in love with the landscape, the lifestyle and, this year, a little-known beer called Blasket Blonde.

On March 4, Keough shared a photo on Instagram of her pint in Foley's, a Kenmare bar, restaurant and guesthouse. "It says Guinness [on the glass] but it is actually a #blasketblonde from @westcorkbrewco. My favorite!" wrote Keough, who blogs and tweets as *Slainte Y'all*.

She also shared her tippie on Untappd, an app where drinkers rate beers. "Love the Blasket Blonde," she said.

Seven months on, Keough would be forgiven for having a bad taste in her mouth. The beer she was sold as Blasket Blonde was most likely Foster's, a Heineken-owned product marketed by loud Australians and not renowned for its taste.

After months of probing by curious microbrewers, Heineken Ireland admitted some of its "low-volume, high-quality draught products" — understood to be Foster's, Beamish and Murphy's — were being sold under names that suggested they were local brews. Several dozen pubs and hotels around the country sold the beers. Blasket Blonde and a number of other phantom brews have been taken off the market and Heineken Ireland, which sold €513m worth of alcohol last year, has put its hands up. "This is not policy," it said. "This should not have happened."

Grant Thornton, an accountancy and consultancy firm, has been brought in to find out exactly what happened. The hangover won't end there, however.

After queries from The Sunday Times, the quoted drinks group C&C said it was also selling its Clonmel 1650 lager in Cork as Pana Cork lager. Unlike at Heineken Ireland, however, the relabelling is company policy. C&C has denied misleading customers, but the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI), which has responsibility for food labelling, is investigating.

The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, meanwhile, has received a complaint, and has said it "will continue to monitor the issue".

Among independent brewers, the over-riding reaction is resignation. "In the craft brewing industry, it never ceases to amaze us what industrial brewers will do," said Grainne Walsh, founder of Metalman Brewing Company in Waterford and spokeswoman for the Independent Craft Brewers of Ireland (ICBI). "People really believe in the ethos of craft beer, and it isn't really fair to be hoodwinking them."

Keough wasn't the only one enjoying the new beer. Several other drinkers rated Blasket Blonde on Untappd from Foley's, and from Paidi Ó Sé's bar in Ventry. One drinker, Jeffrey M., shared a picture from Boston's Bar on Valentia Island of a Blasket Blonde-branded pint glass with an image of sea and rocky islands. "Crisp fresh taste," he said.

Reviews of Blasket Blonde popped up on Untappd throughout May, June, July and August. "A great refreshing lager, Belgian style if you ask me?" said Thom M., who had a pint at Boston's Bar on July 20.

For months, Untappd listed West Cork Brewing Company as the maker of Blasket Blonde. Out of 46 ratings on Untappd, Blasket Blonde scored 3.65 out of five.

"It inadvertently gave credibility to Blasket Blonde as a microbrewed local beer," said Phil Cullen, owner of Mountain Man Brewing in Cork, and a founder of Beer Ireland, a representative group for artisan brewers. On July 22, though, the owners of the West Cork Brewing Company, a microbrewery located in Casey's hotel in Baltimore, west Cork, confessed to "feeling perplexed" by the situation.

"Having a paranoid Fight Club type feeling that I've been leading a double life brewing some other beer at night!!" they said on Facebook. "Anyone know who is really brewing this Blasket Blonde?"

Dominic Casey, director of the West Cork Brewing Company, told The Sunday Times the company was aware of the Untappd listing from about April. "People were saying it was brewed in west Cork, so it was being associated with us," he said.

Once Casey told Untappd his company had nothing to do with Blasket Blonde, the beer was an orphan. Jacqueline Stedman, owner of Liquid Curiosity, a drinks consultancy in Bantry, Co Cork, took on the mystery. She found a local hotel selling another unknown beer, Beantraí Bru, whose logo included criss-crossed hurleys, similar to the badge of the Bantry Blues GAA club, and an fuchsia image, the quality mark of the West Cork Development Partnership. When Stedman asked where the beer was made, no one could tell her.

Sources in the brewing sector said complaints were made to the FSAI, which sent out an inspector to investigate. Fingers started to point to Heineken.

A staff member at Paidi Ó Sé's bar said last week that Blasket Blonde was "delivered through Heineken" and the drinks company's reps also provided glasses. "We sold it for a few weeks," she said.

In Heineken Ireland, however, there was confusion. On August 10, in response to questions from Stedman and others, the Heineken Ireland Twitter account, @Heineken_IE, tweeted: "All beers we brew are labelled as ours. We don't brew/



PEOPLE REALLY BELIEVE IN THE ETHOS OF CRAFT BEER, AND IT ISN'T REALLY FAIR TO BE HOODWINKING THEM

claim Blasket Blonde or Beantraí Bru." When the noise continued, the company dug deeper. "It began to emerge that there was some awareness that something was going on," said a source. "It may be that some people in Heineken Ireland, with the best of intentions, had some knowledge and role in facilitating it."

As well as the sales of Blasket Blonde and Beantraí Bru in Cork and Kerry, pubs in other parts of the country were selling "house" brews that turned out to be Foster's, Murphy's or Beamish. Maggie Timoney, the Heineken Ireland managing director, was not best pleased, said a source. "She hit the roof. It had to stop."

Heineken Ireland will not comment on how long the Grant Thornton review will take or whether its findings will be published. While some brewing sources speculated the scheme could have been cooked up by a small number of people, others said the fact that pubs had branded glasses and taps pointed to a more organised scheme.

"Publicans are notoriously cost-conscious. The idea that they would go out of their way to get branded glassware and taps doesn't wash," said one local brewer.

Cullen said it appeared the big brewers had deliberately targeted popular tourist areas. "The first thing a tourist will ask is, do you have a local beer?" he said.

One source said Heineken had a past history of supplying "white label" stout that pubs could rebrand as a "house" beer. The theory was that steadfast Guinness

drinkers would be more likely to try a house stout than Murphy's or Beamish.

"It never came up as an issue because the microbrewing industry didn't exist," said one brewer. "Now, if a pub displays a house brew, a customer is likely to ask if they have a microbrewery out the back."

With the rising popularity of craft beers, big brewers have been getting in on the act. Microbrewers complain, however, that the ownership of some drinks isn't always clear to drinkers. Heineken owns Cude Hour ale, and last year launched Orchard Thieves cider. Franciscan Well, a Cork craft brewer, is owned by Molson Coors.

Diageo's Hop House 13 lager has quickly swallowed about 3% market share, and the Guinness maker has recently introduced an ale called Galway Gold. While C&C said its trade customers knew the origin of Pana Cork lager, Cullen said that the firm was unfairly putting the onus on bar staff to inform customers. "That's the main concern: the lack of transparency."

Walsh said there was added confusion because the term "craft" had no legal protection and could be used by anyone. Likewise, putting a place name in a product name, such as Pana Cork lager, was "misleading but not illegal", she said.

Many microbrewers, meanwhile, contract-manufacture beers for pubs and other microbrewers. Before it had its own brewery, the Metalman Brewing Company's beers came from the White Gypsy brewery in Tipperary under contract.

Sean's Bar in Athlone, the oldest pub in Ireland, sells "house" beers that are actually made by the Carlow Brewing Company. "These are our own beers," said Declan Delaney, manager of Sean's Bar.

In the fallout from the Heineken Ireland and C&C debacle, ironically, microbrewed beers could suffer if drinkers aren't sure what they are getting out of the tap. To reassure drinkers, ICBI and Beer Ireland have both created logos for their members to use on their beers, highlighting that they are from microbrewers in Ireland. Wayne Dunne, a home-brewer who blogs as the Irish Beer Snob, said microbrewers had to make a compelling case for pubs to stock their products.

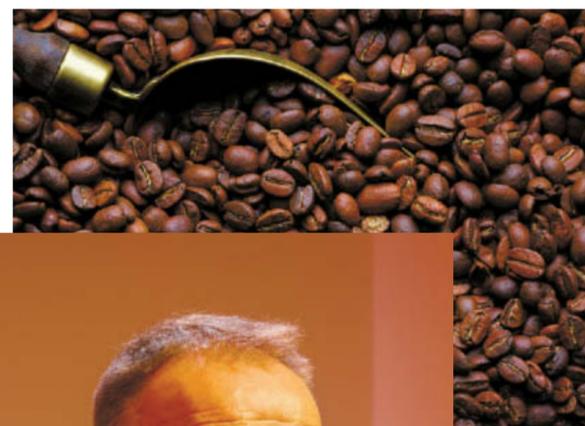
"Some microbrewers are crap sales-people," he said. "There is no point having the best beer in the world if you can't sell that product. That just makes it easy for the likes of Heineken and C&C."

Dunne said customers needed to be more vigilant too. "Does the pump clip [on the beer tap] say where it's brewed or have a brewery name on it? Does it say the style and ABV [alcohol by value]? Can the pub tell you where it's from? If the answer is no, then it's probably something bad."

The pump clips for Blasket Blonde and Beantraí Bru did not include any of that information, he noted. "They looked like they were thrown together on a PC."

Dunne predicts more shenanigans in the sector and, ultimately, more buyouts of microbreweries by the large drinks groups. "If stuff like this is going on when microbrewers have only 3% market share, what will happen when they get to double-digit share?" he said. In the beer wars, it seems, this may just be the first round.

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