

Cheers for the beers

Richard Fox finds that a quiet revolution is brewing.

It seems to me that the binge drinker has replaced the lager lout. Yet more negative imagery for the beleaguered alcoholic drinks trade. Whatever next – prohibition?

Yet there is hope. Indeed a sea change is in the air – and it's all about the most unlikely candidate to stage a cultural and taste based revival for alcohol: beer. Ex-Gordon Ramsay workplace, The Aubergine, now boasts a beer list; the eponymous Anthony's in Leeds offers a beer list alongside its wine list, and now Harvey Nichols are staging their very own food and beer gourmet night.

One could be forgiven for thinking beer is the new wine. But that's silly – beer has been enjoyed as a beverage of gastronomic importance when wine was just a twinkle in the great



Ale fan: Richard Fox.

vine's eye. Indeed, the oldest recipe ever discovered was found carved into a stone tablet from ancient Mesopotamia. Dating back several thousand years BC, it is a recipe for beer. The Pharaoh kings held this royal beverage in such esteem they got buried with pitchers and grains of barley to sustain them in the after-life. But it wasn't just a means of intoxication: quality was of paramount importance. King Wenceslas, not quite living up to his good name, imposed the death penalty for anyone caught exporting his prized Saaz hops, while back in Blighty, we were flogging people for producing poor quality beer.

There has always been an artisan approach to the making of beer. Herbs, spices and other adjuncts such as honey have traditionally been employed in the revered art of brewing. The fact is, these beers – with all their variety of colour, flavour, texture, balance – and suitability for different cuisines never

really disappeared, they just got lost amidst the overwhelming volume of cheap, tasteless lager.

And when, after a marketing assault by wine in the '80s that made the *Charge of the Light Brigade* look like a playground fracas, beer in the gastronomic sense appeared to have got its final marching orders. Fortunately, you can't keep a good thing down forever; the resurgence is well and truly underway, and Yorkshire's leading the way, and it's coming through food.

Food scares have resulted in us asking serious questions about the provenance of our food. As our understanding of intensive production methods and unethical handling procedures grow, so does our demand for more locally produced, higher quality produce. Farmers' markets are burgeoning, the organic movement is gaining momentum: we want taste and flavour, and we don't mind if it takes a little longer to grow, or it doesn't last in the fridge for 10 years without so much as wilting.

Artisan restaurant suppliers, Moorsfresh of Pickering have experienced such a demand for their "food with a story to tell" from chefs and restaurateurs, that they are now launching deli-in-a-box, so the consumer can now order Sue Gaudy's clotted cream – made in her farmhouse in the Dales, or Paul Tallings' free-range chickens from Harome, that make other supermarket free-rangers look like they've been stuck in a Big Brother house for their, still relatively short lives.

This food revolution means we're getting back to flavour, rather than being dictated to by fashion – and that's where the beer comes in. The speciality beers we're talking about are artisan products, with recipes perfected over centuries.

We're getting back into seasonality, traditional British and northern European cooking, and these beers have the credentials to elicit and enhance the food flavours they can be matched with. The spicy foods of Asia and India – which have now become part of food culture – are also far more suited to being matched with the grain rather than the grape.

Tonight at Harvey Nichols in Leeds, head chef Richard Allen will be preparing a sumptuous, four-course dinner. There will be a different beer with each course, each one reflecting the diversity and depth of flavour of beer. And each one will compare or contrast with the food flavours to create a taste experience of exceptional quality.

I'll also be giving a short talk on what beer and food matching is all about.

Richard Fox is a writer, broadcaster and director of The F&B Partnership... fandbpartnership.com. The Food & Beer evening at Harvey Nichols, Leeds is tonight at 7pm and costs £40 per head for a canapé reception and four-course menu with a different beer to complement every course. To book, telephone Harvey Nichols Fourth Floor on 0113 204 8000.