



“Least they could have is a ladies parlor in the flamin’ place”.

Show with no beer

The story of a beer strike that affected the Sydney Royal Easter Show in 1948 is a beauty, but more broadly it highlights how tastes and attitudes towards alcohol have changed. Over the last 200 years there have been some big shifts in beer competition and consumption.

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The 1948 Easter Show was meant to be squeaky clean. After three people were bitten by snakes the previous year during snake-charming performances, and with public opinion turning against the exhibition of freaks, it was time to reform some of the wilder entertainments. But a Show without beer? Nobody in their right mind would have dreamt of going that far. Only a beer strike could do it.

When the beer strike started in Sydney on 26 February, it only took a week for people to go crazy. By then nearly every metropolitan pub had run dry of beer and a rush on wine and spirits was leading to general shortages of liquor. With pubs almost deserted, over 600 barmaids and barmen were in danger of losing their jobs. Remarkably,

Sydney’s drinkers turned in droves to an unexpected source to slake their thirst – the milkbar. And it caused chaos. In the city, after work crowds outside three milk bars near Wynyard station were so huge, police arrived to clear footpaths. One milkbar proprietor said lunchtime custom had been just as unmanageable, even though counter staff ‘slung’ six milkshakes a minute. ‘They were the most disgruntled set I have ever tried to serve,’ he told *The Sydney Morning Herald*. ‘Most of them did not know what to order, or how many they were supposed to have. Queues were so long that some customers waited over half an hour.’

At the heart of the dispute were 200 maintenance workers wanting improved

conditions and entitlements. The men were coopers, responsible for the hygiene and maintenance of kegs at Sydney’s three breweries: Tooth & Co, Tooheys and Resch’s.

The situation seemed intractable but a glimmer of hope was kindled for the beer drinking public when news spread that beer would be available at the Easter Show when it opened. The licensee of the ten liquor outlets at the Showground, Mr Preston, had apparently secured enough beer to last for the first day. His catering firm had over 1,000 gallons in stock leading up to the strike and Preston was hopeful of adding to this, making frantic arrangements to truck in supplies from Melbourne.

When the gates opened at the Moore Park Showground thousands of people headed straight for the bars. They queued for two and a half hours before 11am when alcohol could be served, oblivious to the fact that a decision had already been made not to go ahead with sales. RAS officials were worried about a stampede, but more than that, there was a real concern other unions might go out in support and declare the Show ‘black’, effectively shutting it down. Unfortunately, nobody had the nerve to inform patrons. When drinkers were finally let into the bars they were disgusted to find only wine and spirits. Rumours abounded. Many believed beer would be sold in the afternoon. While they waited they tucked into the hard stuff. A tough day was had by police who arrested over 100 drunks, carting them off in what was described as a ferry service to the Darlinghurst lockup.

Like the rest of Sydney, the Show stayed dry of beer, which surely changed the tone of many annual social gatherings: the meeting of country and city friends; competition post-mortems; the pleasures of a holiday ale.

From the very beginning beer was an important part of the Show, in convivial terms but also in regards to competition. At the 1824 event, the second held by the new Society, Mr Joseph Grose was awarded a prize of ten Spanish dollars for a hogshead of best beer, made from malted barley and colonial hops. It was joyfully consumed at the dinner that night and famously found to be so strong that reason was ‘dethroned’ and ‘madness and folly ruled in its stead’. The effect rather undermined the intention of colonial authorities which was to encourage the brewing of beer so that lower alcohol ale might replace spirits – then of such dubious quality and potency as to be downright poisonous. The lower orders were in grog’s thrall; cheap spirits were thought to be a threat to health, morals and productivity.

But making beer was not easy in the warm Australian climate; barley and hops were difficult

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Left: Cartoon by William Edwin Pidgeon appeared in Sydney’s Sunday Telegraph 14 March, 1948
Below: Knocking back yeast, Tooths Brewery, 1948 (Image: State Library of NSW d1_42793); and Barley in germinating chamber, Tooths Brewery, 1948 (Image: State Library of NSW d1_44389)





The 1880's saw big changes in beer. The lager style of Bavaria, which kept well in all climates, was finally made here. Melbourne brewer, William Foster, championed the style and came up with the idea of giving hotels free ice so it could be served cold.

Above, clockwise: Franz Josef Lager advertisement from 1908 Sydney Royal Easter Show Catalogue; Tooth & Co brewery carts, first and second prize winners in the Royal Horse Parade, Sydney Royal Easter Show 1911 and 1912; and Foster's Lager advertisement from RAS Annual 1915



to grow and beer often spoiled during the rudimentary floor malting process. Additionally, once made it did not keep well. Many brewers began to import grain. To support local production, the Agricultural Society began to demand proof by affidavit that only locally grown barley and hops had been used in the beers exhibited at shows. Later, they relaxed the rule, calling for the use of colonial ingredients wherever practicable.

Experimentation with crops and brewing methods continued, but the sector did not prosper until the 1860's and 1870's when breweries began to spring up everywhere. By the 1880s there were approximately 80 breweries in New South Wales, many in country towns. Because beer did not keep well, it did not travel well either, and was best consumed close to source. Drinkers living in remote places necessarily stuck to spirits, which explains the ongoing allegiance to rum in the rural community.

At the Shows of the 1870's judges looked for light pale ales, sparkling and full on the palate. Preference was for around 4% alcohol content and a moderate retail price. Once again, this was to encourage 'moral improvement'.

It was the 1879 Sydney International Exhibition, however, that opened Australia up to beers of the world, exposing the public to a whole new range of styles. Up until then heavy British styles were most common in Australia, but at the Austro-Hungarian Wine and Beer Hall in the grounds of the Garden Palace, the Dreher beer on tap proved immensely popular. In judging, the beers from Germany were highly commended as superior.

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Below: Clydesdale-drawn Tooheys Ales wagon outside Tooheys building, c1915

served cold. At last, a cold drink for a hot country. No wonder it took off. New mechanised malting processes, coupled with the development of new yeast strains, meant brewing could be done in a more controlled way, on a more industrial scale, especially as Louis Pasteur's groundbreaking work in microbiology meant bacterial processes were better understood. So began the demise of the small breweries, and the economic recession of the 1890's didn't help.

As country rail networks improved, product could be delivered far and wide, and when tough new regulations were passed at the time of Federation to introduce excise and control the industry, all the small players gave up or were bought out.

At the Easter Show, a class including beer was offered until 1918, but after that there was little point. Tooth & Co and Tooheys controlled the entire market in New South Wales. They were eventually taken over towards the end of the

twentieth century by the two big liquor industry conglomerates, Lion Nathan and the Foster's Group. Gradually, small breweries began to reappear as boutique enterprises in the 1980's, and although progress was initially slow it was unstoppable – the public loved the product. When interest in craft beer escalated the RAS responded, establishing the Sydney Royal Beer Competition in 2007. In 2013 the competition was renamed to include cider.

With so many independent producers now back in the game, the likes of the 1948 strike and the blanket disruption to supply that it caused will never be seen again. And a good thing too, the old drinkers would say. For 77 days they went thirsty, in the course of their torture trying everything they could think of to make unfamiliar drinks more palatable. Tomato juice in everything was a fad with some – including sherry and port. To

keep up the city's supply of spirits some were watered down or adulterated so they needed disguise but quite a number of batches were found to be so seriously compromised they were almost lethal with several drinkers hospitalised. At the Show, health inspectors conducted testing to make sure alcohol was safe for patrons.

Although the great beer strike of 1948 wasn't good, it wasn't all bad either. Some showgoers 'forced' into drinking wine admitted to being pleasantly surprised. Who knows, perhaps the strike played a small part in the long process of broadening Australian tastes for the better.

Today, bars are full of discerning drinkers and connoisseurship rightly extends to beer. With so many independent makers and different varieties to choose from, buying a round can be a complicated business, especially when food matching is involved. But in 1948 things were much simpler. For those showgoers, any beer that was wet would do. ■