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**July 20, 2001 | 'Deep Throats' at CR tasted & tagged Stroh's as 'Best'**

Somewhere this moment, some pathetically confused soul, lost in the mind-numbing depths of manic indecision, is facing the fearsome anxiety that presents itself upon one of those unguided treks to the beer store.

Before him, 1,000 choices - lagers, stouts, pale ales, the variety is infinite.

Dazed, the thirsty man can recall only the advice found in the pages of America's leading source of reliable, objective consumer information. He grabs a case of . .

**Stroh's!**

That's right, Stroh's - the bland, insipid lager now brewed by Pabst - is rated the Best Buy in the August edition of Consumer Reports magazine.

I'm not even sure devoted Motowners would heap that much praise on this Detroit diesel. It's a guzzlin' beer; you crack one open and drain it without really pausing to consider the complexity of its malt sweetness or the balance of its hop varieties. Other than its price - a mere \$2.90 for a six-pack of cans, according to CR - there's really nothing to commend it. Even the magazine's analysis acknowledges little difference between it and the lowest-rated domestic lager, **Rolling Rock**.

So how does the bible of smart consumers give such a high rating to a can of industrial-grade swill?

By ignoring nearly every topflight craft-brewed beer in the world.

In this laughably naive taste-test, a panel of unbiased experts tested 54 beers. Not one of them was produced by a microbrewery.

Ellen Klosz, senior project leader on CR's beer report, said the staff decided not to test micros this year because "they really were not on the rise - they were declining. A lot of the microbrews that were very popular five years ago [the last time CR tested beer] had gone under. So we concentrated on a variety of widely available brands. "

Never mind that eliminating micros from a beer sampling is the equivalent of rating the best restaurants by tasting only Big Macs and Whoppers.

The fact is, microbreweries are not declining. According to the Institute for Brewing Studies in Colorado, American micros produced more beer in 2000 than ever: 5.9 million barrels, up 4 percent over the previous year.

CR does include a half-dozen purported "craft lagers. " Among them: **George Killian's Irish Red** (made in a Coors factory), **Red Wolf** (brewed by Anheuser-Busch), and the horrendously lifeless **JW Dundee's Original Honey Brown Lager** (Genesee). What, nothing from the artisans at Miller's non-existent Plank Road Brewery?

"We were disappointed in the lack of micros," said IBS director Paul Gatza. "To classify Red Wolf as a craft beer is a stretch. "

It's not just the micros that are ignored.

There are no Belgians, only one Brit (**Bass**), and just two Germans (**Beck's** and **St. Pauli Girl**). There are no porters, no bocks, no Oktoberfests, no fruit beers, no wheat beers, no brown ales.

The world's most flavorful variety of beer - ale - is almost entirely dismissed. Only six were tested, and one of them - **Anchor Steam** - is arguably a lager. No surprise the highest rated was **Sierra Nevada Pale Ale**, technically a regional brewer but one of the few tested with honest-to-god micro roots.

Klosz said CR's marketing department selected beers for testing based on market share. "We don't want our readers to be frustrated, to give a Best Buy to something they can't buy. "

Fair enough. With a readership approaching 20 million, CR is intended for the lowest common denominator, not a few hopped-up beer freaks.

But by skimming off the cream of the crop, the supposedly pro-consumer mag leads its readers right back to the same old price-fixing, union-busting, environmentally diseased mega-corps. No fewer than 28 of the tested brews are made by the big three, Coors, Miller or Anheuser-Busch. It's the domination of these entrenched corporations, firmly established with billions in advertising and a government-subsidized distribution network of rails and trucking, that's crippled competition from smaller, locally owned businesses.

But CR's ratings are worse than irresponsible. They're dull.

I mean, does anyone care about a snoozer matchup between the likes of Keystone Light and Milwaukee's Best Light? It's the same beer!

Meanwhile, the magazine conveniently leaves out **Guinness Stout**, the No. 5 imported beer in America - an ale that is available in pretty much every backwater burg on the planet.

Why? Because it's a dark beer, and the darkest CR gets is amber.

This kind of duplicity raises doubts about the actual judging. The magazine, though, provides few details.

Klosz said ratings are based on "certain attributes [that] anyone who knows anything about beer would be looking at. " Among them, "hoppy or warty, sweetness or bitterness. "

They were rated by two judges with "combined 20 years of experience in the science and testing of beer. "

Gatza said the magazine had contacted his organization - which oversees judging at the Great American Beer Festival - for help in developing test standards. "But I wasn't very impressed with what they came out with," he said. "I think they opened themselves up to a pretty high margin of error, by having a judge pool of only two. That doesn't mean the results are wrong, but it does call them into question. "

So, who were the judges?

"I can not tell you," Klosz said. "We do not give out that information. "

Stroh's? The judges have good reason to stay anonymous. But I've got a bone to pick with 'em. A case of beer - a case of good beer - goes to the first Consumer Reports judge who calls me and explains himself.

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