

Beer's War of Wordplay — The Semantics of “Craft” and “Quality”

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The connections created between people is tied to our power and ability to communicate, something drilled into us at an early age when we're reminded to “use your words” and “think before you act.” And when it comes to making commerce happen, you better double down.

It presents a unique and constant challenge: no matter our word choice, we're stuck using subjective language, hoping it lands with others. Ultimately, it means we might not have a full grasp of the weight of interpretation or its value.



Critical Drinking

Beer's War of Wordplay — The Semantics of “Craft” and “Quality”

By Bryan Roth

In recent months, this kind of confusion has found its way into beer, where battles once waged over our wallet are now seen through the prism of verbal and visual cues meant to either bring beer lovers together or push them apart, depending who you ask. Which begs the question: if our concern is supposed to be about the product itself, and not necessarily how it's sold to us, are we supposed to care about the emotional benefits of buying a beer as much—or more than?—the functional purpose of delivering something that tastes good and is easy to enjoy? The companies that serve us may be divergent in purpose, but their products continue to find common ground.

Which presents an odd situation in which the most enthusiastic beer lovers see key points of separation in brands and breweries, yet the vast majority of consumers do not. They're just looking for something to entertain their tastebuds on a weekend evening. For most people, as much as we may be loathe to admit, it's “just beer.” After all, you still have to get through almost a dozen macro brands—half with some version of “light” in their name—before Yuengling Traditional Lager is listed as the first Brewers Association-defined “craft” beer among the best-selling brands in the U.S.

The constant back-and-forth over objective definitions of what “craft” or “independent” means for beer overlooks the value placed on the terminology pulled from our own dictionaries. Instead of seeing these words as a way to convey particular feelings toward a beer of choice, we're missing a rather straightforward purpose created over years of marketing by trade organizations and breweries themselves.

As we enter a period where [“independent” is set to act as the vernacular de jour for the most in-the-weeds beer lovers](#), it's unfortunate that the previous effort surrounding the ideals of “craft” may fall to the wayside. While many words have malleable interpretations, when it comes to sales, the effective message that is relayed to customers through “craft” actually matches up with its intentions: it's how most of the American public thinks about “quality.”

“Craft culture fetishizes the authentic, the traditionally produced, and the specific; it loathes the engineered, the mass-produced, and the originless,” Lauren Michele Jackson recently wrote for [Eater](#).

All this isn't a bad thing, necessarily, but rather an outcome of cultural and societal pressures made normal by our own expectations. Words can be usurped and repurposed for particular uses, but their meaning is still carried outward by all.

In terms of the beer industry, the use of “craft” as a defining phrase for a certain kind of brewer or brand has become synonymous with expectations of quality. This itself is born from the story of “craft beer” as the opposing force to the hegemonic stranglehold of American light Lager. From its earliest days, “craft” or “microbrew” represented a stark contrast of what beer could and should be, and its merits were based on separating itself from expectations of how American beer was previously considered: bland and boring.

According to [reporting by Stan Hieronymus](#), it was in the spring of 1987 that Association of Brewers founder Charlie Papazian first defined “craft brewery,” calling it “any brewery using the manual arts and skills of a brewer to create its products,” using very particular language as a means to separate a certain kind of producer from the “mega” or “giant” breweries of the day. “Craft” had been used as early as three years prior by writer Vince Cottone as a way to describe these small businesses, but Papazian’s “official” designation and the eventual merger of trade groups in 2005 to form the Brewers Association, legitimized “craft beer” as a defining term ordinary drinkers could use to connote “better.” Even academically, craft beer has been recognized as a [leader of the “taste revolution.”](#)

TASTES CRAFTY TO ME

In recent years, following global financial turmoil and [changes in spending patterns](#), ideas of what “craft” means now connect more often with assumptions of quality than ever before. This partnership of word and feeling is so strong in today’s marketplace that even when a term like “craft” is used by multinational corporations, it still rings true to its purpose with consumers, identifying a product in their minds as a “better” version of some otherwise faulty or flawed item.

Even synonyms like “[artisan](#)” or “[handmade](#)” perform the same task, providing an easily understandable turn of phrase that is meant to conjure ideas of superiority. Anecdotal evidence like the [rapid growth of farmers markets](#) or [increased attention on “Main Street”](#) point to strong interest by even casual consumers to have a stronger connection to the services and goods they buy.

“Marketers are attempting to use artisan to suggest value-oriented, premium in a down market economy,” food and beverage market research firm The Hartman Group [wrote in 2011](#), as the U.S. was fully exiting from the Great Recession. “Just as natural became organic and moved beyond to local (due to its link to nature), we’re seeing artisanal grow out of a tradition of premium and prior to that, gourmet.”

Prior to a recent pivot to focus more on “small and independent” as a way to publicly define craft brewers, the Brewers Association relied on “craft” as the word and characteristic in describing its purpose and members to the public. But as “craft” beer—in all its meanings, dependent on ingredient choice, ownership stake, or size of 6 million barrels or less—slowly works toward a larger audience, what is produced by subsidiaries of corporations like AB InBev or mom & pop businesses have more in common to average consumers than what the U.S. trade group may let on.

A growing collection of beer drinkers are searching for “better,” but that doesn’t mean “independent” carries significant weight in definition outside of a niche audience. A recent [study](#) by Brewbound and Nielsen showed that 81% of “craft beer consumers were familiar” with phrases of “independent” and “independently owned” in relation to beer, not that they preferred those words to define the business or beer they choose. Of note, nearly 40% of survey respondents self-identified as “regular craft beer drinkers,” already skewing their familiarity with those phrases as it relates to beer.

“Even though consumers say they understand the terms ‘independent’ and ‘independently owned,’ there remains the question of whether they actually know about ownership changes and if those would actually affect their purchasing decisions,” Brewbound’s Justin Kendall [wrote](#) as a paraphrase of comments from Nielsen senior vice president of beverage alcohol practice Danny Brager.

In a separate survey by UBS Evidence Lab, 45% of about 1,200 U.S. alcohol consumers said that independence doesn’t matter when choosing a “craft”-specific beer. Thirty percent of respondents said independence was “extremely important” in craft beer, per [reporting from Business Insider](#).

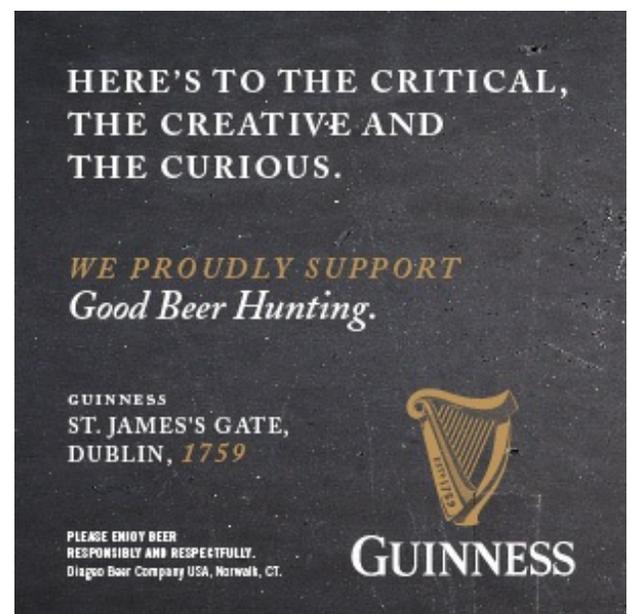
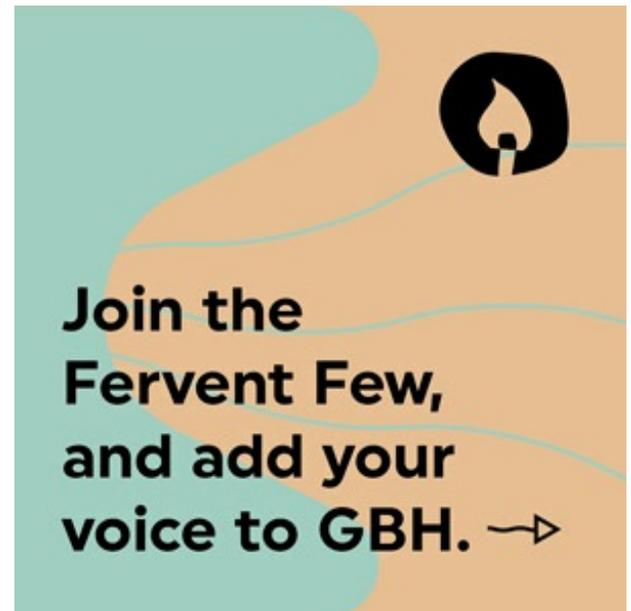
To get a better understanding of the value of word choice, it’s worth pointing to a 2015 [study](#) by the Brewers Association and Nielsen. A poll of about 1,000 “craft beer drinkers” and “less-than-weekly” drinkers showed that simply using the word “craft” influenced interest in trying an alcoholic beverage, and 30% of “craft beer drinkers” associated “quality” with “craft.” There was roughly a 50/50 split for participants who noted that using “craft” as a descriptor would impact interest in trying an alcoholic product.

Whether or not it was intentional, consumers have been for years receiving messages that “craft” equates to “quality.” In that same UBS survey, 41% of respondents noted a craft beer’s quality is unchanged after being bought out and 11% said the quality would actually improve. Ownership isn’t a matter of what tangibly tastes good or bad, but the marketing might help point the way.

“[Jim Koch] really believed that independence was a selling feature and that the customer really cared about that,” Magic Hat founder and serial entrepreneur [Alan Newman said on the GBH podcast over the weekend](#). “While I believe that is true for a segment, that segment is too small to support the industry, and this idea that the solution to the problem [of increasing BA “craft” share] is putting an independent logo on a bottle that could be sitting on the shelf for three years because they didn’t fucking date their fucking beer, and that’s the BA’s reason to take [new breweries] in, and they talk quality without backing it up with anything that is objective.”

As a tool, the thematic use of “craft” has long been used to sell a variety of products, but within beer, it was a founding tenet on which the mythology of “craft beer” is created. Craft was and is the anti-macro beer, standing on aspects of [vilifying AB InBev](#) while representing a return to fuller flavor and diversity of choice. It’s unclear—even statistically—how “independent” can help fill that space.

Anchor’s Fritz Maytag has been [called](#) “savior” and “father to a new revolution.” Stone’s Arrogant Bastard proudly [tells drinkers](#)—with tongue firmly in cheek, of course—that they are not “worthy” of the beer’s “taste or sophistication” and won’t “be able to appreciate an ale of this quality and depth.” Oddly, this is still done in this new age where Stone produces Who You Callin’ Wussie? Pilsner, a very macro-style beer specifically branded to scream “craft” at the same time. We’re now at a point where breweries can identify whether they need to focus on hardcore



beer lovers or regular consumers, pitting ego versus id in the process.

For years, beer people have talked about how AB InBev is trying to [kill craft](#), and also how the company wants to [usurp craft](#), when the real situation is it's just buying into a reality created and pushed by others—one where consumers have already made up their minds of what "craft" is, and how it's connected to pleasurable experiences.

Like the hops and malt that go into every batch of beer, the culture created by consumers and aided by the beer industry itself is now a part of perception that goes into every pint of beer, whether it's defined as "craft" by the Brewers Association or not. The expectation of quality, simply by not being Budweiser, Miller Lite, or Coors, is part of our social fabric.

"People construct their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes about foods on the basis of cultural values, with psychosocial factors shaping their food choices," a team of American researchers [wrote](#) on behavioral and social influences in 1998.

As a society, our preconceived notion of "good" is already tied to certain ways food and beverages are talked about or marketed, which ultimately means little changes as the Brewers Association steps away from "craft" as its core argument and moves closer to "independent." Given that craft beer's sales volume only makes up about 12% of sales, it's a mathematical impossibility that any significant number of shoppers make purchase decisions based on who and who isn't "independent" as selected by the Brewers Association. Rather, the themes of "craft"—in all its uses for all goods—means people associate non-macro beer with something that's better, knowledge of "independence" be damned.

"The hardcore craft beer drinker is bothered. But they're a small proportion," Mintel global drinks analyst Jonny Forsyth [told Beverage Daily in 2015](#). "There really aren't many people like that. The majority of people don't know, the person on the street doesn't know. What our research shows is that the majority of people don't care. People want the major brewers to produce more craft beer, and they want the quality beer. It doesn't have to be about being small; it's about good quality beer."

Almost universally, through [casual surveys](#) and [academic research](#), flavor is what drives interest and sales. Even in the Brewers Association's own partner survey with Nielsen, the top results for respondents when choosing craft beer was flavor (99%), freshness (94%) and aroma (79%).

Which creates a unique challenge, even if the BA, businesses, or beer fans don't want to use "craft" as the defining term for how to describe what makes full-flavored or unique beer different. Ultimately, it doesn't matter: the majority of consumers already connect their subjective ideas and expectations of "quality" to phrases that have been pushed so hard in the lexicon of alcoholic beverages that they're simply part of how we talk and think about beer. "Craft" is good and, increasingly, if "independent" is chosen as the buzzword to replace "craft," it does so as a word that needs a whole new explanation to consumers, having shed one long known and expected to mean "quality."

GOOD ON YOU

Those within the beer industry can define what quality means in process, but not product. Not entirely, at least.

Like finding a "good" or even "best" beer, the effort is never objective, which is why internally, "quality" can be managed and highlighted, as seen through the Brewers Association's position of a [quality ambassador](#). However, the true definition of what quality means and stands for is left to the drinkers themselves. "Quality," in relation to an



experiential good, places its burden of proof on the end user. If they're interested in something different than what they're used to, communication of intent is important. By utilizing "craft," any brewery of any size indicates that it's supposed to be "better." This has likely created a situation where the Brewers Association sees the term of "craft" as losing its cache with its intended group of supporters, when it still seems like the word has plenty of life left.

Whether in terminology or physical labels, the path of "quality" within beer may simply start at a point of being different than previous cultural norms of American Lager. As it winds through various turns of phrase that can include "craft" or "independent," there's a greater strain to further isolate what the word is supposed to mean in the first place.

Clearly, there's interest and emphasis within beer to better understand high levels of production and operation, but how those aspects come to bear for drinkers is an entirely different test. The communication strategy of using particular words to create a vernacular around beer has happened. Even the most casual drinkers may have an idea of what it's meant when "craft" is brought into conversation, if only because of its use and place among other goods and cultural effects.

What that means going forward—and its power as a tool to further differentiate and define—is up for debate. Problems surrounding the use and purpose of "craft" and its variants is based on what we already understand and interpret. A deconstruction of their meanings suggest that in the grand scheme of things, they don't matter simply because we're told they matter.

"'Craft' needs to go away," *BeerAdvocate's* Todd Alstrom recently [opined](#) on Twitter. "It's meaningless and stunting the beer industry's future growth. Quality, ethics and culture should be the focus."

He later finished his [thought](#), perhaps sensing the irony of the situation: "Unfortunately ['craft beer' and 'craft brewer'] are forever connected, and 'craft' has become synonymous with 'good.'"

Bryan Roth

Bryan Roth is a writer living in Durham, North Carolina, who's been recognized by the North American Guild of Beer Writers with a "best blog" award for his site, *This is Why I'm Drunk*. He recently became the lead of the NAGBW.

[See more stories from Bryan](#)

Critical Drinking

Beer is so much more than what's in the bottle for the men and women who make it and sell it. There are real livelihoods at stake, and they spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about the industry they serve. These are their forward-looking thoughts, and their critical thinking on what's happening now.

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