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Cask Ale Happenin' in the Big Apple

To NY beer hounds, he's familiar, if reserved, presence at cask fests that have proliferated around town. Jan 7 it was DBA Brooklyn, where Brit-born Alex Hall could be spotted casting a proprietary eye over the towel-draped ranks of casks for 4th annual Williamsburg Cask Beer Festival, as line of thirsty drinkers stretched 40 feet down aisle before evening had even gotten ripe. If anyone can single-handedly claim credit for burgeoning awareness of unfiltered, unpasteurized genre, it's cask consigliere Hall, who launched 1st fest in his native UK 16 years ago and brought act to NY and then Penn in 03 after marrying American woman.

By now 50+ bars and restaurants in NY have permanent cask availability, vs a handful a decade ago. Cask beer finder updated last Aug on his cask-ale.co site lists 618 US outlets with permanent cask taps - double level just 2 years ago, Hall says. It includes 77 in NY and 83 in Penn, his stomping ground, and 58 in Calif and 36 in Mass.

Cask popularity reps triumph over inherent complications. While in England, cask ales are prevalent enough that craft brewers maintain automated cask-washers, here casks are usually hand-washed. Keeping track of casks is headache for craft brewers, too. At bar level, layouts may not be conducive; whether lack of cellar space or bar furniture too thick to accommodate engine, even if owner is willing to drill. Given greater labor-intensity, casks carry modest premium over regular craft beers - generally, 10.8-gal cask gets same price as 13.2-gal keg of brewery-conditioned beer, Hall said.

Alex got into racket when, at 27, he was keeping cellar at Evening Star pub in Brighton, where regular who went by Attila the Stockbroker had dream of mating a Campaign for Real Ale cask ale fest with great music gig. Thus was born Glastonwick, which under Attila celebrated 15th anniversary last June with 68 cask ales and 12 farmhouse ciders and perries (from pears). Its 500+ tickets typically sell out weeks in advance.

Living in States, Hall gravitated to Brooklyn's Brazen Head tavern for its rare abundance of 2 cask lines and proposed to help owner launch full-fledged fest. Only a few had previously happened in US, mainly in Chicago and Boston. At time, "it was unheard of to have more than 2 or 3 cask taps at the same time," Alex recalled. Inaugural event, in 03, had handful of ales from obvious candidates like Brooklyn, Victory and local brewpub chain Heartland. The partners repeated event every 6 mos, broadening # and variety of beers as more distributors got into act. Soon he was up to 3X per year, at rotating locations. Cask count has ranged as high as 47 at event at Chelsea Brewing in 09 and 104 at Rattle N Hum during Craft Beer Week in 2010. Key has been distributors' willingness to accumulate their own inventories of casks, eliminating disincentive among brewers. By Hall's estimate, Union Beer maintains 400 and SKI 100.

The 3-day DBA fest brought 16 offerings from brewers in US, Canada, England and Wales, from sessionable Breconshire Golden Valley pale ale (from Welsh brewer) to monsters like Blue Canoe Oak Aged Wheat Wine (11.5% ABV, from Titusville, Penn, brewer) and Voodoo Black Magic (15.5%, from Meadville, Penn). Crowd was young and by no means overwhelmingly male.

By now, cask ale events no longer are tough sell: "I rarely approach them any more; they approach me," Hall says. At consumer level, "everyone into beer on at least a half-serious level knows what to expect from a cask," he said. "Young people are discovering them, and it's a whole new world. It's taking off big-time thanks to distributors embracing it." Indeed, his quasi-monopoly on concept is ebbing and even Brazen Head is starting to back off a bit as newer options arrive. "The downside now is that there are too many cask fests," lamented Hall - sure sign that, thanks in great part to his efforts, idea is becoming mainstream.