

History of green beer on St. Patrick's Day



By Mike Riley

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St. Patrick's Day has a lot of symbols attached to it like shamrocks, leprechauns, green clothing and eating corned beef and cabbage. Another notable part of this Irish holiday, perhaps to go with that corned beef and cabbage, is green beer. But, how did green beer become synonymous with St. Patrick's Day in the first place? It all started down in New York with one Dr. Thomas Hayes Curtin, back in the early part of the twentieth century.

Curtin was an Irish American physician who made green beer for a St. Patrick's Day party at the Schnerer Club of Morrisania in the Bronx in 1914. While there were reports of other green beers appearing around the same time, he is generally credited with being the first to come up with it.

While green beer today is made with a few drops of green or blue food colouring into your favourite lager, Curtin used a different method of turning his beer green 107 years ago. It was called wash blue, which is an iron powder solution embedded with a dye, which at one time was used to make white clothes that had faded bright again. Aside from the food colouring more commonly used today, some brewers have also experimented with using spirulina, a blue green alga, to colour their beers green in recent years.

Green beer actually had a very different meaning before Curtin made it into a symbol of St. Patrick's Day, and still does within brewers' circles. It referred to beer that was too young, or green. It still had acetaldehyde in it, giving it a bad taste because it has not yet fully fermented. In fact, this type of green beer could make people sick and no doubt not feeling very festive at all.

While it took a few decades to really catch on, by the 1950s green beer had become a popular symbol of St. Patrick's Day, leaving the wash blue behind for the more palatable green or blue food colouring in the process. By the late 1980s it had caught on internationally, even in Ireland.

Nowadays, of course, green beer has become synonymous with St. Patrick's Day. Millions of pints of it are consumed each year on March 17. So, raise a glass of green beer, and say this traditional Irish toast;

May the leprechauns be near you

To spread luck along your way

And may all the Irish angels

Smile upon you on St. Patrick's Day!