



BEER IN THE BIG APPLE

Glynn Davis travels to New York City in search of cask ale

Perching on stools along expansive bar counters in dimly lit venues scanning extensive beer lists has been a highlight of my annual business trips to New York City. And a feature in many of these bars over the years has been a prominently placed handpull or two dispensing cask ale from US breweries.

Sadly, over recent years, many of these handpulls have been underused as the number of venues serving unfashionable cask has taken a drop, not helped by Covid-19. However, there remains a core of bars where cask still plays an important role in attracting fans of this unique style that can complement the ranges of keg widely available in the city. Seeking out these venues can be a tough assignment post-pandemic, but on my recent trip to NYC I took up the challenge to find those bars in Manhattan and nearby Brooklyn committed to serving the style.



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My pre-journey planning involved emailing Matt Birde, manager of Valhalla Bar, which had regularly stocked cask, but he told a familiar story: "We currently do not have cask up, but still have the engine." But he helpfully added: "If you would like me to give you some info on a bar that currently carries cask ale in NYC, let me know."

This was a good start and when Matt recommended his local joint Drop Off Service, I recalled a previous enjoyable visit to the venue in the East Village some years ago. It is named after its previous incarnation as a laundromat, but today it is renowned for its happy hour and perennially friendly vibe. Atop the bar was a handpull serving Mizmaze (4.4 per cent ABV) from Dutchess brewery at \$8 a US pint (473ml versus 568ml for a UK measure) that had plummy, ripe fruits balanced with some tartness in the finish. The



Former Stratford-upon-Avon chef Jason Hicks now runs Jones Wood Foundry bar

manager Kitty informed me: “People either love it or hate it, but we get people who come in especially for it.”

It’s pleasing to say that Drop Off Service has lost none of its charm and buzz – as well as commitment to cask – and its very welcoming ambience. This was highlighted by a customer who spotted my interest in the cask option and recommended I visit his local bar Jones Wood Foundry on the Upper East Side. He also generously invited me to join him and his family for tacos from the takeaway next door, which he brought into the pub.

Any cask hunt in NYC should involve taking the subway to the smart Upper East Side of the city to sample the two cask options at Jones Wood Foundry, which are a major draw of the bar along with its chatty owner Jason Hicks. A chef from Stratford-upon-Avon, he decamped to New York and originally aimed to ship cask ale over from various UK breweries, arranging deals with Greene King and

Fuller’s. However, although he still stocks the likes of Fuller’s ESB (5.9 per cent), these are now keg versions.

Instead, his focus today is on breweries in New York and surrounding states, and on my visit he had a cracking Weavers Pale Ale (4.2 per cent) from small producer Old Glenham brewery that was a welcome cooler temperature than most cask in NYC. Other favoured breweries of Jason are Dutchess, Strong Rope and Fifth Hammer, which can often be seen on his two taps.

He complements these beers with British food, which is served in a venue that nods to traditional English pubs, including a Fuller’s sign outside. Despite the challenges with cask, Jason remains upbeat: “We have no problem selling it, it’s more a problem sourcing it. It’s our schtick and we are a traditional British pub. I’d like to have a cask-only bar and have a dedicated person sourcing the beers.”

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He points out that he used to also operate the Shakespeare pub in Midtown, but during Covid-19 he decided to downsize his operations and sold it. Before heading south to check out this bar, I popped into one of my favourite NYC venues, the Pony Bar – a mere 100 yards from Jones Wood Foundry. This is owned by Dan McLaughlin, who in 2009 purchased a batch of casks and would send them around breweries to be filled with cask ale.

“We’d sell four casks per week at the original Pony Bar in the Hell’s Kitchen district [that is now called Hellcat Annie’s] and we were doing very well, but over time demand gradually slowed and then we moved to the current site and ended cask in 2018. 🍺



Clockwise from main: Cask oasis the Pony Bar; Jason Sahler; Grand Delancey handpumps are on the move

Initially, we'd have to throw away 25 per cent of a barrel but, then when it got to 50 per cent wastage, it became like a public service," explained Dan.

He would bring cask back again, but only when there is a change of drinking culture involving a move to lower-ABV beers and a shift away from the bitter-free, hazy IPAs that have become the go-to beer style in the city. Without any cask at the Pony Bar, it was soon time for me to move on to the Shakespeare, which sits in a hotel basement and, with its richly wooded interior, could easily be a British pub except for the screens behind the bar showing US sports.

These screens did not distract from the three handpulls on the bar, although only one was in use on my visit. I also noticed London Pride on keg (4.1 per cent). Thankfully, the cask option was a good one – ESB Tavern Ale (5 per cent) from Strong Rope brewery – served in a dimple mug. At \$12 for a pint, this premium



pricing no doubt reflects the area in which the pub is located. Thankfully, it was worth it as the subtle fruits and bitterness led into a finish that made for a very drinkable beer.

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Strong Rope is a brewery I first visited just after it was founded in 2015 and I took a trip across town to its new taproom and

brewery perched on the edge of Red Hook in Brooklyn with incredible views across the Hudson River. It is an expansive taproom that was very quiet on the January afternoon of my visit, but Strong Rope founder Jason Sahler assured me the venue is packed when the sun comes out.

The brewery has always had a bent towards restrained British styles and cask ales, according to Jason: "In the plans Strong Rope was to be all cask, but we moved away from that; although we're still committed to it and we've a cask festival in February – with 13 breweries and four of our own cask beers."

Although many of its beers are English-inspired and the output includes a Pub series of brews, the



Clockwise from main: Strong Rope — packed when sun shines; Sam Schwartz; great views from Strong Rope

focus is on using only New York malt and hops to give the beer its terroir. The Pub range has included a cask version of Burton IPA aged on Brett and the regular Pub Ale (5 per cent). This combination of US/UK influences led to Good Job IPA (5.8 per cent) that is available on cask and keg and based on a Burton water profile with a wild hop variety from Southern New York HBX001 that creates a crisp and snappy beer with a voluble mouthfeel.

Jason's passion for cask is reflected

in his optimism for the style in NYC: "The ones still holding the torch [for cask] are the passionate ones. The more we can showcase it, then the more it will be taken up. We'll start to see other people become passionate about it and it will become more mainstream. I'd like to have a cask-only bar with six engines. Hopefully we'll find like-minded people who are also excited by this," he said.

While in Brooklyn he recommended a visit to another brewery with a

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skew towards English-style ales, Wild East Brewing Company, which sometimes includes a cask option among its in-house keg beers. A visit to its dark and moody taproom could see the likes of Moderance ESB (5.4 per cent) available, which is another example of how the cask styles in NYC rarely stray into the golden ale variant that is popular in the UK.

Strong Rope cask beers were also regularly available at the Grand Delancey bar in the Lower East Side within a food market where I had agreed to meet Alex Hall. He is a cask aficionado who moved to NYC in 1999 from Brighton and, while working as a cellarman at renowned craft beer bar d.b.a. in Brooklyn, ran cask festivals and also worked with

Paul Pendyck, importing UK brewing equipment into the US to facilitate the adoption of cask.

Unfortunately, a New York snowfall



scuppered our meeting, but Grand Delancey's Sam Schwartz greeted me at the bar where I sampled Dapple (4.2 per cent), a pitch-dark English mild from OEC Brewing in

Connecticut, and a rare cask of Sierra Nevada Celebration Ale (6.8 per cent) that had a warming character offset with some bitterness.

He admits he is catering to a small, but dedicated, clientele who seek out cask, but points out a positive trend for the acceptance of a broader range of cask styles. "Serving a dark mild would have been absurd [not long ago], but there is a taste for more sessionable beers today.

People now want a couple of beers rather than one big beer, and there is also a move to classic European styles of beer," he suggested. Since my visit, the Grand Delancey has closed, but the plan is to move to another part of town.

From his base in Brooklyn, Alex Hall

also pointed me to the forthcoming cask release at the atmospheric Brouwerij Lane in his local neighbourhood that takes place every month and was to feature a pin from OEC Brewing.

"It taps late-afternoon and you have to get there early to grab a table. Cask has a solid following at Brouwerij Lane and its monthly release is on the beer map," he said. Although my trip did not extend long enough to sample this particular barrel, it did provide me with some positive thoughts to take away on the future of cask in NYC and something to look forward to during my 2025 visit.



Glynn Davis is a journalist covering the retail industry along with pubs, beer and restaurants. He is also the founder of retailinsider.com and beerinsider.com