

# Are you and your pals ready to put brand loyalty to a test?

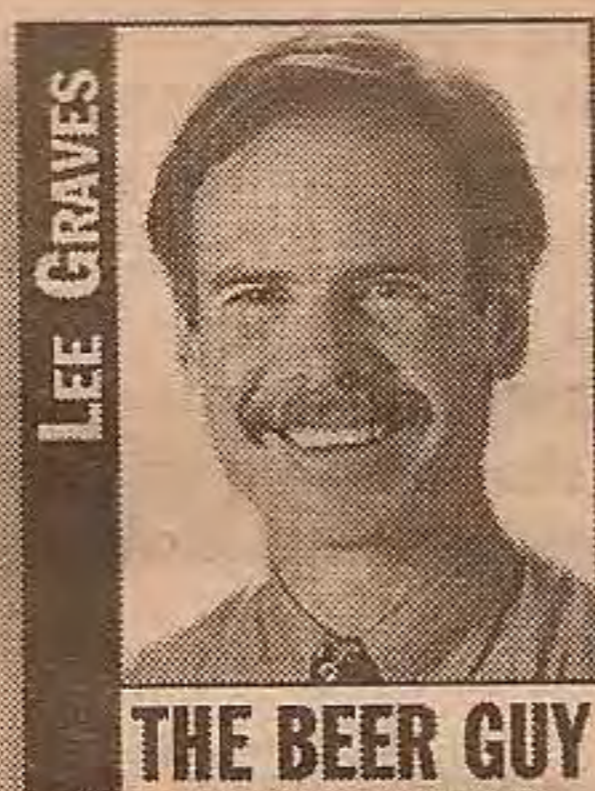
**T**he time has come to issue a challenge to the mainstream beer drinkers of America.

It's time to put your taste buds to the test, to show your beer allegiance is more than brand loyalty.

It's the Pepsi challenge, only for Bud-Miller-Coors devotees.

We'll get to the details in a second. First, I want to relate the sequence of events that has led me to fling down this foam-filled gauntlet (hmmm, that's a rather messy metaphor).

A couple of weeks ago I was in a beer and wine store to pick up some Westvleteren Belgian Trappist Ale, which at \$8.50 per 11.2-ounce bottle is not the kind of beer you'd want to fling around in a metal glove.



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THE BEER GUY

My conversation with the store's owner

turned to the intense loyalty of Bud-Miller-Coors drinkers.

"Craft beer drinkers, if they don't find the particular brand they came in for, they'll buy something else of equivalent nature from another brewer. But if somebody comes in to buy Budweiser or Miller, if we don't have it, they'll go somewhere else," he said, or something to that effect.

A few days later I got an e-mail from a co-worker who is a homebrewer.

## A matter of taste

"[A co-worker] and I were discussing whether there were differences in the taste of the big American-style lagers. We both agreed that yes, there probably were, but for me, not enough difference to make me prefer one to the other. Kind of like the difference between spaghetti and linguini.

"Have you ever thought of rounding up people and doing a taste test on Miller, Bud, Coors, Corona, etc. etc. to see if people really could tell the difference, or if they had a preference?"

Those two thoughts were bouncing around in my brain when I picked up a copy of the August issue of Consumer Reports, which features beer as its cover story.

The new report comes five years after a similar blowout, and there's an interesting change regarding mainstream lagers. The 1996 piece summarized, "Our taste tests showed that beers from the big American brewers are bland but consistent." While clean, the "flavor palette of the mass-produced brews isn't very bold or broad."

## Magazine tests

That report had a little companion article titled "Could you tell? Bud vs. Miller." Magazine staffers loyal to one brand or the other were picked for a blind taste test, which

showed that only a few could tell them apart. "Our conclusion: Brand loyalty is governed by the brain, not the mouth."

The 1996 analysis was done with 17 tasters, while the 2001 results are based on two "consultants." And they find distinct differences between the big three. "Anheuser-Busch beers . . . had complex flavors that included green fruit, malted grain and boiled hops. Miller beers . . . often had yeast and honey notes reminiscent of warm bread. Coors beers . . . featured fruity and floral notes."

I'll let you read the article to find out what beers the magazine rates as best buys. What I want is your help running blind taste tests with mainstream loyalists who swear they'll be able to tell their Bud from the other person's Miller or Coors.

## Your mission . . .

Here's the drill. Let's find a Bud fan, a Miller fan and a Coors fan. Flesh out the group with one craft beer lover and one more person who likes beer but has no loyalties. Buy some Budweiser, Miller High Life, Coors Original, one other mainstream lager (such as Milwaukee's Best, Stroh's, Schlitz or Old Milwaukee) and one craft-brewed lager (such as Samuel Adams, Yuengling, Jacob Leinenkugel or North Coast). No imports.

Take some clear plastic cups and number them 1 through 5, making a set for each person. In a different room from your tasters, pour samples of the same beer into the No. 1 glass, then another into No. 2, etc. For example, you would have Miller in all the No. 1 cups, Sam Adams in No. 2, Coors in No. 3, etc. As much as possible, have the beers the same temperature, and pour equal amounts with equivalent heads. Serve each guest the five cups. Tell them the five beers you've poured, but make sure they have no idea which beer is in which cup.

On slips of paper, have each describe the color, aroma and taste. Have them guess which beer is in which cup, then rate them from best to worst. No discussion is allowed until all the slips are completed.

While this may sound somewhat clinical, it actually can be loads of fun, and you can expand it beyond five people. One of the best parties I've ever had was a blind beer-tasting years ago, and by the end of the evening a normally reserved pastor had commandeered the sound system, assuming the mantle of DJ, while some of the womenfolk were sharing secrets they would blush about later.

If you're interested in setting up a taste-test group, drop me an e-mail just so I'll know. We'll coordinate the results for a later column.

And all you loyalists remember — this gauntlet is for you.

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