



On-Tap

Greg Evans

The Not So Lowly Beer Mat!

Beer mats or coasters are more than mere table levelers! They are used for pub games, as a glass cover telling everyone that you'll be back to finish your pint or by waiters in many European bars to keep a tally of your drinks. There's even a name for collecting them – Tegetology, from the Latin "teges" for a mat or covering.

The first beer mat appeared in 1880 and was invented by Robert Sputh of Dresden, Germany. Popular history tells us that Europeans who could afford tankards with attached lids had no problem keeping insects, leaves and bird droppings out of their beer as they enjoyed a brew in the local beer garden. The less fortunate used simple felt mats which they placed on their tankards to achieve the same effect. The felt mats had to be regularly hung up to dry for re-use and over time became less than hygienic, no doubt affecting the taste of the beer.

In 1893, Sputh patented his fibre-cast mats and the problem was solved. The production process was simple and involved casting paper pulp into moulds which set over night. They were absorbent, hygienic and cheap to produce. Soon breweries saw them as an advertising medium and shortly after 1900, brewery names began to appear on mats. By the late 1920's, multi-colour mats had become common and graphic artists were regularly employed for custom design work. Katz International of Germany, manufacturers of mats since 1903, became a recognized leader in the industry and the world's largest producer.

Though mats have been produced for other consumables, they are still most often associated with beer, where they have been used for some ingenious promotions. One Scottish brewery produced mats containing invisible ink. A message imbedded in the mat could only be detected after the application of several drops of beer. One in every thousand mats contained the message "You may have won a prize." On the reverse side was a simple competition which

when completed, was sent into the brewery where substantial prizes were awarded.

Equally creative was the Swiss brewery that produced a mat with a drawing of an elephant on one side. A round hole was cut through the middle. When you stuck your finger through it, a live trunk appeared!

Mats have often been produced for special occasions - the Olympics, the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 or for awards won by a brewery. Images of sports heroes, historical events, cartoon characters, jokes and popular pastimes such as fishing and hunting, have also been popular. Some breweries, especially in Europe, have issued collectable sets while others issued mats that could be used as postcards.

Whatever the image, mats have often reflected the mood of the day, fads and even the changing tastes of drinkers. Certainly social change is often reflected in the subject matter. What was popular or acceptable fifty years ago, may not be today. So give the common beer mat a closer look – in their own way they're a little bit of history.

Greg Evans is the Executive Director of the Maritime Museum of B.C. and a brewing historian.



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