

Seasoned Veteran

Modern Brewery Age, Nov 27, 2000, by Peter V. K. Reid

John Roux-Lough of Veltins U.S.A. has fought the Germans; now he sells their beer.

Having stormed ashore in the first wave to hit Gold Beach in Normandy with the Irish Guards Fusiliers on June 6, 1944, it was fitting that the Irish would send John Roux-Lough to the United States in 1963 to consolidate the American beachhead for Guinness Stout. At the time, Mr. Roux-Lough was freshly retired from the British Army after a 22-year career that saw him rise to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. From 1939 to 1944, Mr. Roux-Lough had served from Norway ("Where we got our asses kicked"), to Normandy ("They were certainly pissed off to see us"). In between, he served in the Western Desert under Montgomery, fighting to drive Rommel from North Africa. Mr. Roux-Lough was a resourceful soldier--although captured twice, he managed to escape in both times. He was finally put out of service in late 1944 after being shot through both ankles during the battle for Arnhem. After WWII, Mr. Roux-Lough served in Palestine, fighting the Stem Gang, and some years later served in the British invasion of Suez.

But all this was scant preparation for his greatest challenge--selling stout to Americans. Mr. Roux-Lough had signed on with Guinness in 1960, and soon was bound for American shores, with a mission to build the market for the company's dark, strong ale in a United States. "Heublein had been the agents for Guinness in the United States," Mr. Roux-Lough recalls, "but it was only sold in bottles. So we had to start from scratch and introduce draught." Mr. Roux-Lough worked for Guinness for 14 years, shepherding and building the Guinness Stout brand in the U.S. market, and then accepting a transfer to another trouble-spot--Northern Ireland. "Guinness asked me to run the company there," he recalls, "but when I arrived in 1974, people in Belfast were killing each other on a daily basis."

By now, Mr. Roux-Lough favored the bite of a hoppy pilsner to the sting of a bullet, so a year later he was back to the U.S., taking a job as vice president of sales and marketing for All-Brand. While at All-Brand, he oversaw the U.S. launch of Moosehead and Foster's. "I was a real street guy back then," he says, "knocking on doors and getting hit in the ass by the cellar door."

In 1981, Roux-Lough resigned from All-Brand to join Molson. "Martlet had a southeastern office," he recalls, "and I worked for them in Atlanta for 16 years. I recall bumping into Joe Heller of Veltins on few occasions, back when he was known as 'Joe Beck's.'"

Mr. Roux-Lough finally retired in 1997, but he really wasn't ready to hang it up. So he signed on with his old acquaintance Joe Heller, now known as "Joe Veltins," to help him launch Germany's Veltins brand in the U.S. "I still know a lot of people down here," Mr. Roux-Lough notes, "I love drinking beer, and Veltins is a damn good beer." Mr. Roux-Lough now serves as a kind of elder statesman for the Atlanta-based Veltins U.S.A., working accounts, and getting the word out about the new German pilsner brand.

Roux-Lough's years of experience have given him some insight into brand building. "It's all about finding the right wholesaler, doing the follow-up and service," he says. "Most important, you never make a promise you can't keep. If you can't keep the promise, you go back and come clean."

Roux-Lough thinks the time is right for specialty-type beers. "Some of the micros are doing very well," he says, "and the younger generation is drinking different sorts of beer, branching out a bit. Price doesn't seem to be as much of an obstacle as it was."

The business has changed a bit in other ways as well. "A lot of beer people today don't drink as much beer as we used to," he says. "I've seen plenty of beer salesmen drinking iced tea, or nothing at all. Not that I'm saying you have to be drunk, but there is a certain aspect of 'if he won't drink it, why should we?' You should show your own brand, and never leave a 1/2 glass on the table. If you can't finish it, don't order it. These days, I see a lot of beer people with laptops, but I really think you should be out talking to customers, not playing with computers. You should be getting hit on the ass by the cellar door, down there checking the lines, making sure the kegs are cold enough, and checking the dates. That's the way to sell beer."

*COPYRIGHT 2000 Business Journals, Inc. in association with The Gale Group and LookSmart.
COPYRIGHT 2001 Gale Group*