

Making the World Safe for Draft Beer

There's a lot of bad draft out there, but Micro-Matic is doing something about it.

Many brewers think of draft beer as the purest expression of their art—beer just as the brewer intended it to be. More than that, draft beer is a great tactical tool for brewers and wholesalers, an opportunity to put beer in front of the consumer in an environment conducive to sampling. If the customer's experience with a draft beer is good, it means many more pints sold, that day and in the future. If the pint is bad, that's it. That drinker might be lost to draft beer forever.

That means there is a lot riding on every glass of beer, for brewers, wholesalers and retailers alike. Unfortunately, draft beer has not been getting its fair share of attention. Thirty years ago, about 70% of beer was served on-premise, and 30% off-premise. Now things are reversed, with 70% of beer sold off-premise and 30% on. Currently, about 9% of all beer sold in the U.S. is draft.

The gradual decline in draft volume has meant that brewers and wholesalers have been less likely to spend time and attention on draft beer. Less time and attention means more draft beer pushed through dirty lines by obsolete air compressors. All too often, there's something amiss in a retailer's draft system, and it shows up in the glass.

John Soler, managing director for Micro-Matic, first noticed severe and endemic draft service problems during the microbrew explosion. "Bars with 3-4 taps went to 12-15 taps," he recalled. "We were selling a tower with 24 faucets. There was a mindset that he with the most taps wins, but bars found they were actually doing the same volume, whether they had 4 faucets or 24. They now had to clean all those lines, and since they now had so many,



Instructor Scott Zuhse leads a class at the Micro-Matic Dispense Institute.

they were doing it less often. The quality of dispense systems went down dramatically."

The combination of dirty lines, together with kegs on tap for long periods with improper gas blends, took its toll. "Those of us in the industry were often finding draft beer out there that tasted horrendous," Soler said. "We started to talk about the need to educate on-premise people and wholesalers about draft service issues."

In recent years, a few brewers and

importers have become very pro-active on draft service, promoting use of mixed gas and frequent and effective line cleaning. The Guinness-Bass Import Co. helped awaken the industry to draft service problems. GBIC put dozens of draft technicians into the field, and emphasized the need for proper gas blends. Today's Guinness Import Co. is a much less beer-centric organization, but other vendors have followed their early lead. Labatt U.S.A. has now hired many former GBIC techs for their own draft-service initiative, and Anheuser-Busch is also moving to address the issue. Within the last couple of years, Micro-Matic, vendor of draft service equipment, has also stepped up to the plate.

"Our entry into draft service education might be considered self-serving," said John Soler. "Obviously we are in the draft business, and we want to sell equipment. But just like everyone else, we were finding it tough find a decent glass of draft beer in a bar."

When brewery reps came to visit Micro-Matic's Allentown, PA, facility, Soler would often take them out to lunch at local restaurants. "We'd go out to places and order a round of draft beer, and the brewers would send the beer back and switch to bottles," Soler recalled. "There was no clearer signal that focus had to return to draft beer."

Leading the Reformation

At that point, Micro-Matic's draft service Reformation effort began. Tom Geordt, Micro-Matic's manager for dispense service training, started to assemble an educational curriculum for draft service professionals.

Like a latter-day Martin Luther, he started by figuratively nailing three theses to the door.

•Number one: line cleaning. "There are huge line-cleaning issues in this country," Geordt said. "What are the procedures? What are the proper chemicals? How long do you do it? This

is very simple stuff, but no one has been taught to do it.”

•Number two: mixed gas. “Many people don’t understand the importance of mixed gas,” Geordt said. “They don’t know why they need it. They don’t know what the benefits are. Again, it’s simple, but many people use the wrong gas.”

•Number three: installation. “Installers often have no concept how to install a draft system,” Geordt noted. “There are people who have been installing lines for 15-20 years, but they don’t know why they do what they do, and they do it the same way every time, with no accounting for the size of the system.”

Using these three subjects as the framework, Geordt developed the Advanced Draft Training Manual, a 160-page draft beer bible chock full of schematics and hard-earned dispensing wisdom. This manual serves as the text for courses at Micro-Matic’s Dispense Institute.

With the training manual at the heart of its curriculum, Micro-Matic backed that up with a million dollars to set up training centers at each of four regional offices—Allentown, PA, Brooksville, FL, Rockford, IL and Northridge, CA. “We made a large capital investment to install these training centers,” Soler said. “The cost was high, but that’s how important we felt this issue was.”

The company scheduled basic and advanced training courses, and set out to train and educate industry personnel on how to install and service draft beer. “We could see that draft beer was in a sorry state,” Geordt said. “We wanted to get people in the door and present information to them in a non-sales environment. It was crucially important that our Dispense Institute would be an educational course and not a sales pitch for Micro-Matic.”

Soler and Geordt expected that most of the attendees would come from the wholesale tier, but the appeal has proved much broader. “Only 20-30% of our students come to us from wholesalers,” Geordt noted. “The balance of our enrollment is made up of brewers, line cleaners and draft installers.”

Taking a dispense course

Each advanced dispense course includes one day of classroom instruction, followed by a day and a half of lab work. In the labs, draft techs can practice installation of every type of draft system. The instructor at Micro-Matic’s most recent advanced course was Scott Zuhse, who recently joined Micro-Matic after 18 years at Coors. For ten of those years, Zuhse was in the Coors national draught sales and



CLASS PHOTO—Students from a recent Advanced Dispense course at the Micro-Matic Allentown, PA facility (L. to R.) Kwame Opoku, Premier Brands, Ontario, Canada; Scott Zuhse, Micro-Matic; Dan Burke, ADM Amalgamated; John Pfluger, Bond Distributing; Gregory Moon, Harpoon Brewery; Todd Fowler, Molson Breweries; Miho Sugiyama, B. United International; Johnny Latinclo, Premier Brands; Dave Burke, ADM Amalgamated; John Sweeney, Sweeney Line Cleaning, Inc.

service department.

For Zuhse, there are three key goals in an advanced draft workshop. “We want to address restriction,” he said, “and by restriction I mean the pressure in a system that you can utilize to balance the system, to acquire a specific flow rate. We also want to address gas blends, and what you should use to propel beer through the system. CO₂ is a great medium, but unless you have everything right, you shouldn’t be using it. Last, we want to master line cleaning. The perfect draft beer system doesn’t do anybody any good unless it is maintained properly.”

Students at a recent Advanced Dispense Course included Todd Fowler, a brewer from Molson; Greg Moon, a sales director from the Harpoon Brewery of Boston; Miho Sugiyama, a sales rep from importer B. United International; John Pfluger, a wholesale rep from Bond Dist. in Maryland; a pair of wholesale reps from Canada, a line cleaning business owner, and several draft line installers.

Each student had a different reason for attending the course. For Harpoon’s Greg Moon, it was getting some technical background on the draft systems he had learned to fix through on-the-job training. “About 52% of our sales in Boston are draft,” he said. “I cut my teeth on broken, dilapidated draft systems, spending a lot of time getting drenched with beer. I took this course to get some training and bring back some expertise.”

Molson’s Todd Fowler works at the company’s Rickard’s microbrewery. As a brewer, he wanted to know more about what happened

to the beer after it left his vessels.

B. United’s Miho Sugiyama had been thrust into repair of service of draft systems through her job as a sales rep. The fact that many of B. United’s beers are esoteric European beers with widely varying carbonation levels had not made her job easier. She brought a keg of Schneider Aventinus with her to the course. Aventinus, a dark wheat beer, has higher carbonation than typical American beers, and just pours as foam if not treated properly. She wanted to get some guidance on pouring this tricky beer.

As the course progressed, each student shared anecdotes about draft service nightmares, and instructor Zuhse explained the physics behind each problem.

Kwame Opoku, a draft tech for a wholesaler in Canada, reported beer coming out in “chunks” at one account. “That’s never a good thing,” Zuhse observed. “Beer stone is a symptom of beer that is too cold. Solids are settling out of beer, and calcium oxalate is coming out of solution. Brewers used to accept beer stone, but it harbors bio. In this case, it is breaking off the walls and ending up in your beer.”

It turned out that Opoku had upped the accounts service level, from once every six weeks to once every three weeks, and this was loosening up the beer stone. “When something changes, you look for the reason. In this case, it was the increased service level,” Zuhse said. “Going forward, you have to look to your specifications. If it is too cold, you might be promoting beer stone. This is a big problem in the industry. You have people cranking

up the glycol chiller too high, putting the temp down to 20 degrees F., just to make up for their crummy walk-in freezer.”

Zuhse emphasized that 38 degrees Fahrenheit should be the target temperature for draft. “You want to target that temperature, so that is the temperature that consumers are drinking,” he said. “That is an ideal temperature for flavor and successful carbonation. If beer is dispensed at 32 or 34 degrees, CO2 may be locked in the product, and the beer will look flat. You should have some carbonation breakout, and froth releases some aroma. Retailers will really cold beer are actually throwing money away, since the consumer is full of gas, and too full to drink much beer.”

Zuhse told the class to get into the habit of carrying a thermometer. “You have to know beer temperature for straight CO2,” he said. “There is no guessing. This is not horseshoes.”

Zuhse also delivered a tangential condemnation of frosted beer mugs. “Frosted beer mugs are horrible,” he said. “The disinfectant kills bugs as it dries on the glass. When the glass is frozen immediately, you freeze the disinfectant on the glass and it doesn’t have a chance to do its work. You have frozen bugs, and that is what people are drinking. You cannot protect the integrity of beer in a frozen glass.”

Moving on to the issue of gas, Zuhse noted that CO2 can be an excellent medium, but everything must be perfect. “You want to prevent CO2 coming out of the beer with the right pressure,” he said. “You want to do that from keg to faucet. You need to know your carbonation level and temperature right through the line. But you will find that very few accounts are perfect enough to use straight CO2.”

Zuhse said that accounts that don’t use a direct draw system should be on blended gas. “Blend gas will save air shaft systems,” he said. “It allows you to keep Co2 in solution. If you have straight Co2, and the beer is at 38 degrees, but at the faucet it is 42, you open the faucet and get a shot of foam, and then streaky beer. This is the most expensive system, a ‘beer chilled’ system. You are using the beer to chill the line, and pouring profit down the drain.”

Zuhse said that even accounts that use direct draw should be on mixed gas. “Pre-mixed gas is more expensive than CO2,” Zuhse noted, but said savings would accrue.

“If a retailer buys a keg containing 1984 ounces,” Zuhse said, “they should be able to make a profit on all of that, not just 1500 of it.”

Zuhse recommended carrying a “beer check” device to measure the percent purity of

nitrogen in mixed gas systems. “You walk in with a device like the Beer Check and it lends you a professional aspect,” Zuhse said, “and it is past time for draft techs to raise the level of professionalism.”

Although the bulk of the equipment used during the Dispense Institute courses, including the Beer Check unit, is made or sold by Micro-Matic, there is no sales pitch made during the course, and no pressure to buy. “This is not a sales program,” Zuhse noted. “We keep things fairly generic, although all the equipment is from Micro-Matic. The principles we teach can be applied to all equipment.”

During the lab component of the course, techs learned how to employ mixed gas, and examined dispense system designs. Direct draw systems, air-cooled systems and glycol-cooled systems were dissected and explained. Instructor Zuhse took the class through hands-on installation techniques and troubleshooting practices.

Tom Geordt says the course has turned out just as he envisioned it—a “total learning environment about every dispensing system in the U.S. market.”

Lately, Geordt says that the course is gaining popularity. “Every class is full, so I think the word is getting out that it is an inexpensive and useful program,” he reports. “The brewers have been very supportive, as have the installers and line cleaners.”

The future of draft beer

Geordt noted that future courses will cover new ground. “We are planning to add more facets to the Dispense Institute,” he said. “with modules for chain restaurants. We’ll bring in managers and talk to them about line cleaning, glass washing and gas mixes.”

The focus on chain restaurants is a natural, because these chains are one of the bright spots for draft in the current market. “Draft

beer is a very profitable item,” John Soler says. “It lends itself to promotion, because there is nothing better to promote a beer brand than a draft beer. The problem is that wholesalers are now focused off-premise. If we’re going to turn draft around, salespeople have to spend time in accounts, educating people on the profitability of draft. It’s interesting that the chain restaurants are very draft-focused. Accounts like Bennigan’s and Chili’s are very sharp operators, and they see how profitable draft is. Approximately 60-70% of the beer sold in some of these chains is sold on draft. If beer is two cents an ounce, and a pint holds 14 ounces, then a pint that costs the retailer about 30 cents can be sold for two or three dollars.”

Unfortunately, the profit story for draft beer has been a moot point for retailers with problem draft systems. Many retailers have had bad experiences with draft because the people installing their system have made mistakes—the wrong gas at the wrong pressure, for example. In other cases, line cleaning regimens have been sporadic and ineffective. This has been a problem even in brewpubs, where the phenomenon is especially tragic. Beer is made fresh a few feet from the bar, but emerges from the taps with off-flavors. There is no doubt that there are still too many bad pints being poured. Bad draft beer is everyone’s problem, and courses like the one Micro-Matic has developed can play a crucial role in addressing this problem.

“We want to partner with our customers,” John Soler says. “Our course is not a three-day sales blast. We want to teach people the concepts and the basics, so they can go back out there and help improve draft beer service in this country. We’ve had a lot of people who work for competitors go through our course, and that’s great. If we all work together on this issue, it will help the industry.” ■



Instructor Scott Zuhse addresses students in the lab at the Allentown, PA, Dispense Institute.