

More than 100 UK brewers urge rethink on CAMRA's cheap beer promotion

110 brewers have signed an open letter calling on CAMRA to end its use of discount vouchers and criticising its refusal to debate the issue at this year's Annual General Meeting.

The signatories are from breweries all over the UK and include many brewers of CAMRA-judged award-winning beers, including national champion beers. More breweries are coming forward in support.

They say CAMRA's current policy undermines real ale and pushes drinkers to corporate chains, to the detriment of smaller pubs. They say the current policy imperils small breweries and many independent freehouses.

In the letter, they say: *"...it is dangerously inconsistent for CAMRA to promote real ale as the pinnacle of the brewer's art while simultaneously making it the cheapest beer on the bar. Inevitably, new drinkers will be led to have little regard for the quality of real ale. The policy also undermines CAMRA's public image, as it promotes that which it was established to overhaul: a limited range of beers from large breweries, served-up cheaply by pub chains."*

The Scarborough Branch of CAMRA had proposed a motion on this issue for the forthcoming AGM in York, but CAMRA has rejected it from the order paper. An appeal has been lodged but will not be heard until the night before the AGM. Had the motion been accepted and passed, CAMRA would have stopped providing or promoting discount schemes, but could have still acknowledged any private businesses that wanted to offer its own discounts.

Currently, all CAMRA members are sent sixty vouchers a year for use at a selection of large bar chains. Each voucher offers 50p off a pint of real ale, cider or perry. The brewers say the practice sets unrealistic expectations among new real ale drinkers, damages small breweries who cannot produce to the scales the big chains require, and disrespects the craft that goes into producing real ale.

The open letter says: *"CAMRA will win more support from the wider brewing and pub industries when it stops driving people to chain pubs for cheap beer, and when it instead respects real ale, respect the pubs that showcase it, and respects the brewers who produce it."*

Scarborough Branch member Phil Saltonstall, who owns Brass Castle Brewery in Malton and who proposed the motion, said: "As a CAMRA member who firmly believes in real ale and its position as the most interesting and characterful way of showcasing beer, I've always been offended every time I am sent discount vouchers with my membership renewal. The discount vouchers run counter to my desire to support high-quality real ale and I'm particularly worried that they drive members away from the very pubs that need their support. I love real ale and these discount vouchers cheapen it.

"I know not everyone will agree with our motion, but many do and there was an excellent opportunity to have the debate in April at the AGM. It is infuriating that CAMRA has sought

to stifle this debate. In doing so, it said the matter was an internal issue, which shows a blindness to the huge impact this has on real ale, breweries and publicans, and CAMRA's public image.

“Of course, CAMRA is a consumer organisation, rather than an industry body, but a consumer organisation that prices its favoured product out of existence does not make any sense. It is the prerogative of businesses to offer discounts as they wish but CAMRA itself cannot be both the champion of good-quality, great tasting cask beer and the promoter of bargain-basement cheap pints.

“To accommodate price discounting, some pub companies insist that brewers provide real ale at a crazily low price. This works for large breweries or cheap-to-produce or short-dated beers, so CAMRA is diminishing the real ale market and either harming small breweries or forcing them to produce something other than real ale. It is a direct effect of price discounting that more breweries are turning to the production of keg beers and discontinuing cask beer production.

“Opponents of this motion may fear it would lead to a reduction in CAMRA numbers, but there are many other ways CAMRA could incentivise membership and in any case, the organisation's incoherent policy on this issue undermines its credibility in almost all campaigning areas. It cannot exist only to boost its own membership numbers, while the fate of real ale is left to its own devices and all indicators on the health of the real ale industry are on the slide. Cask beer needs a self-respecting and energetic Campaign for Real Ale now more than ever.”

<https://www.beerguild.co.uk/news/more-than-100-uk-brewers-urge-rethink-on-camras-cheap-beer-promotion/>