‘Brexit annihilated our export market’: British brewers shift production to the Alps

As Brexit has created tough challenges for UK craft beer producers exporting to Europe, British companies have set up home in the mountains



Tim Longstaff, from Stockton-on-Tees, is brewing craft beer in the Alps (Photo: Supplied)

By Katy Dartford

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Amid the towering peaks of the French Alps, British craft beer has discovered an unexpected home.

As Brexit has created tough challenges for UK craft beer producers exporting to Europe, British companies that have set up home abroad have been finding success.

In the face of regulatory hurdles and volatile markets, an increasing number of UK firms are tapping into the artisanal and locally produced product markets of the Alps, finding a welcoming base.

Tim Longstaff, from Stockton-on-Tees, set up Sapaudia Brewing Company in the Tarentaise Valley, surrounded by the world's three largest ski areas, five years ago. The firm now sells 300,000 pints a year and recently won two bronze medals at the World Beer Awards.

While craft beer is a relatively new addition to France's beverage scene, there is a burgeoning interest in it. "Last year, for the first time in France, beer outsold wine… What's currently trending in the USA or the UK will likely become fashionable in France within 6-12 months," says Mr Longstaff.

Since the UK left the European Union in 2016, British brewers have struggled with problems including protracted delivery times and dampened UK exports.



Jack Geldard says exports have decelerated since Brexit but says ‘we can capitalise on that by catering to our domestic market here’ (Photo: Alex Messenger)

“Covid halted our export market, and then Brexit annihilated it,” says Sean Calnan, former director of the now-defunct Old Dairy Taproom brewery in Kent. “Despite our best efforts to resurrect it and even forming a consortium of breweries to facilitate European sales, the loss of our export market debilitated the business. Consequently, we ceased trading as we could not afford to service our debts.”

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The business entered administration in 2022 and, under new private ownership, has reinvented itself as a bar, no longer brewing its own beer.

Mr Longstaff has confronted similar challenges, saying: “We utilised some UK suppliers, but we need swift delivery times from suppliers, and post-Brexit delivery times can be agonising.”

He attributes Sapaudia's success to being more than just a British brand in the French landscape and working hard on local connections. "Beer is for everyone, and a substantial aspect of Sapaudia is narrating the story of the Savoie and our local mountains, area and history," he says.

Big Mountain Brewing Co is another British firm that has been bringing the UK craft beer tradition to the winter sports community in the French Alps, in this case in Chamonix.

Co-founder Jack Geldard says that exports, particularly from smaller breweries, have "definitely decelerated since Brexit" but says "we can capitalise on that by catering to our domestic market here".

Mr Geldard set up the company with Matt Livingstone, who was craving modern craft beers that were unattainable in the French alpine town. They began by home-brewing hoppy beers in 2014 and have now created a hub for outdoor enthusiasts in their Chamonix bar.

"From the outset, we aimed to cater to outdoor-minded, mountain-loving individuals", says Mr Geldard. "We've constructed a community around that."

Their beers are now permeating further into France, "enabling people to savour the taste of the mountains even when they return to the city".

Both breweries acknowledge the universal attraction of a well-brewed pint following a day immersed in alpine activities, despite the variance in British and French palates.

Mr Longstaff sees British breweries in the French Alps as the ideal pairing, just like "a fresh pint of 'Lost in the Woods' and a tartiflette."