

Exploring the Unknown
by
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True Story: A relatively small brewer decided to purchase a full truckload of stainless ½ barrels in “AS-IS” condition from a known very large brewer. Payment of course was in advance ... after all, ‘a large brewer must be a respectable brewer’. Not long afterwards, it was discovered that the entire load of approximately 850 kegs consisted of ‘leaker’ kegs which had been placed in the seller’s ‘to be repaired’ inventory. The seller, content with ‘keeping his end of the bargain’, when confronted by the buyer with the problem, politely reiterated their sales policy of ‘As-Is’, and would not exchange them.

So which of the two, buyer or seller, should get the first bullet? Obviously the buyer didn’t ask enough questions, obtain a detailed written purchase agreement with some warranty language, and take the time to look at what he was purchasing. All used kegs are different! On the other hand the seller should certainly have included the word ‘Usable’ in his sales description. Right ?....

Wrong! How could any keg seller possibly know your basis for usability unless you tell him?

Ok then, if a seller guarantees ‘No Leakers’... Are they good ones to purchase? Here we go again ! If this is the only bit of evidence regarding the usefulness of given kegs, then certainly, the answer should be a resounding ‘NO’. Remarkably, the word “USABLE”, for many, becomes the sole basis for purchasing vessels which must house a brewer’s final product. You know.. the brew that he bravely stakes his good name and reputation on, and the same one that can greet a customer with a kindly ‘Hello’, or in a blink of an eye . . can kiss him ‘Goodbye’.

Let’s consider for a moment what you’re up against when you purchase ‘UNKNOWN’ kegs.

- a) First of all, keep in mind that the seller is going to sell you his worst kegs first. Wouldn’t you?
- b) The larger the brewer, the less likely that he will sort kegs specifically to your liking. Therefore you will take what he gives you, and sort away the undesirables yourself. Two questions immediately come to mind 1) What do you consider desirable?, and 2) Why wouldn’t you buy those in the first place?
- c) All kegs are not created equal. . . unless the seller bought all of his kegs at one time and you happen to know where and when. But if he’s like the vast majority of brewers, he bought a few now, a few later, and then ‘inherited a few others along the way. So what.. you might ask ?
- d) Different manufacturers in different countries, use different methods, in different vintage years, to create different design kegs, with different valves for different markets ! I think the key word here is different, wouldn’t you say? This could mean that pile of similar looking straight-sided kegs may have the following hidden surprises for you:
 - 1) Previous owner’s names deeply embossed in upper and/or lower skirts.
 - 2) Foreign (non-owned kegs) that the seller has no right to sell to you
 - 2) Kegs which may be 5 piece construction rather than more modern deep drawn type
 - 3) Valves which may be unusable with current American tap couplers.

- 4) Valves Necks which may be positioned for specific automation
- 5) Valves that may be usable but for which parts are no longer available
- 6) Valves that may require specific removal tools, o'rings, or stainless lock rings.
- 7) Kegs that hold pressure but have been blown out due to freezing
- 8) Kegs with lower skirt damage so severe that services are imperative.
- 9) Paint stripes, welded on name plates, old stickers
- 10) Kegs that held rootbeer, red wine, or have an especially difficult odor to remove
- 11) Kegs with heavy internal protein soils, hop resin compound stains or heavy beerstone.
- 12) . . . and of course every batch of "Unknowns" has its 'percentage' of basic leakers.

At this point I will assume that the above list of 12 is long enough. There are more, however. Be also advised that this litany was not written to somehow convince you that purchasing used kegs is less than prudent. On the contrary, it's very prudent at a time when new equipment prices are skyrocketing while perfectly good, previously owned equipment can be had at 'good-deal' prices. The point to be made of course, is that the risk factor is substantially greater if you cannot purchase what I'll refer to as '**Familiar**' kegs instead of out of sight "Unknowns. But how possible is this ?

Ideally, you should inspect the kegs you purchase, inside and out. That means pull the valves and take a good look. The outside appearance is only half of the story, but unfortunately you won't get the opportunity to look inside until you buy them and get them home. Kinda' late isn't it ? Then of course you'll have valve o'rings to buy, etc., and you haven't even pressure tested them yet to see if they work.

Can you imagine giving the above list of 'likes and dislikes' to your keg seller? Since most of them are in the beverage making business and not in the keg sorting business, your response, in all likelihood, will either be rude or comical. But, when you spend your good time shopping for questionable kegs, it's no longer a laughing matter. Do it right! Do the research. Get your deal in writing and for heaven's sake be specific about what you buy. Make sure your seller will honor his contract by means of an exchange proposal for kegs received in error.

On the other hand, since the majority of brewers would rather be making product than playing 'Keg-Hide & Seek', you may also, discover that your interest would best be served by allowing a dedicated keg Seller / Reconditioner to perform the work that you specify. (A common keg broker has the same problems you have.) Consider becoming 'Familiar' with a keg expert, rather than going out and having to go 'one-on-one' with each and every keg you buy. That's what we do for a living ! You specify what you want, and we warranty what you get. Kegs may be inspected, acid cleaned, and ready to use, or you can decide to do much of the work yourself. At least you'll know that the big list of little surprises won't be jumping out to bite you on the bung when you open the truck door.

In the end, whichever way that you choose to proceed into that endless void of keg purchases, shall determine whether you'll be walking on Familiar ground . . . or Exploring the Unknown.