

Drinks that just don't measure up

Shorts that are too big and pints that are too small – we take a closer look at the growing problem of illegal pub measures



A Leeds barman demonstrates how to free-pour spirits into a glass without measuring them first

The next time you're in the pub, check your drink – it may not be the measure you paid for. Two recent undercover investigations by Yorkshire trading standards officers (TSOs) have found that measures of beer and spirits are often served short.

When they carried out spot checks in Barnsley, they found that more than half the premises served a pint of beer that was between 5 per cent and 10 per cent short. And West Yorkshire TSOs found almost a quarter of their shorts were too short.

More investigations in Leeds highlighted another problem – drinkers in city-centre bars could get as much as 50 per cent more in their spirit glasses than they'd ordered (see 'Time, please', right).

Serving wrong measures is illegal but TSOs think the problem, particularly with beer, is increasing. Chris Howell, the Trading Standards Institute's measurements expert, said: 'Short measures remain a significant problem, partly because hand-pulling a pint is less accurate than using a beer meter, which pours out an exact pint.'

Official figures show that every fifth pint is short by at least 5 per cent, which means licensees sell 200 million more 'pints' each year than they buy from their suppliers.

TSOs think moves by the brewing industry to get a pint classified as a minimum of 95 per cent liquid, with the rest made up of a frothy head, will not help matters. The government has estimated that if pubs serve 100 per cent liquid every time, the trade will lose around £100m a year.

The Campaign for Real Ale pressure group opposes the plans and has launched an Honest Pint campaign. Spokesman Jonathan Mail said: 'People are entitled to a full pint. A 95 per cent rule will make the problem worse because TSOs will have to allow a tolerance below that figure as well.'

But the brewing industry argues that the head is a traditional part of a pint and should be included in its measurement. Neil Williams, of the Beer and Pub Association, said: 'Short measures are not a problem for the industry. A barman can judge the head on a beer and people are aware they can ask for a top-up if they aren't happy.'

If you think you've been sold the wrong measure – whether too small or too big – contact your local trading standards office.

Serving wrong measures is illegal but TSOs think the problem is increasing

Checklist

Things you should know when you're at the bar

- Requests for top-ups should be received with good grace and never refused.
- Gin, rum, vodka and whisky must be sold in specific quantities, such as 25ml. Other spirits can be sold in any quantity.
- A thimble measure of spirits or wine must be poured out in the customer's presence.
- Free-pouring straight into the glass is a legal way to serve spirits.
- The spirits in a cocktail (which is defined as three elements) can be any quantity. Squeezes of lemon or lime can count as an element, although ice doesn't.
- A bar must state what measure of gin, rum, vodka and whisky it sells.

Time, please

It was bad news for licensees in Leeds last month when we did a spot check on city-centre bars.

Instead of short measures, a West Yorkshire TSO, accompanied by a *Which?* researcher, found the opposite problem – over-pouring.

We visited six bars and found nine out of 12 drinks were too big by at least 10 per cent. The worst example was at Revolution Bar, on Call Lane, where a 25ml single measure of vodka was 50 per cent over.

The TSO told the six managers he would send them a warning letter. He reminded them about the issue of binge drinking and the implications for people who wanted to limit their drinking if they were driving.

A spokeswoman for the Alcohol Concern charity said: 'It's very difficult for people to set benchmarks and stick to them if measures are over-poured. And it's then even harder to create a culture of responsible drinking.'

A spokeswoman for the Portman Group, an industry body that promotes responsible drinking, agreed: 'To serve a customer more alcohol than they have asked for is irresponsible and could even be dangerous in some circumstances.'

There was no evidence that staff in the Leeds bars were deliberately over-pouring – in most cases the spirit was quite legally free-poured into a glass.

But Martin Plant, Professor of Addiction Studies at the University of the West of England, who has studied the issue of binge drinking, thinks the problem of over-pouring spirits is widespread. 'If you can get people drunk more quickly, you can get them to stay at the bar for longer,' he said. 'The more drinks you have, the more you are going to buy.'