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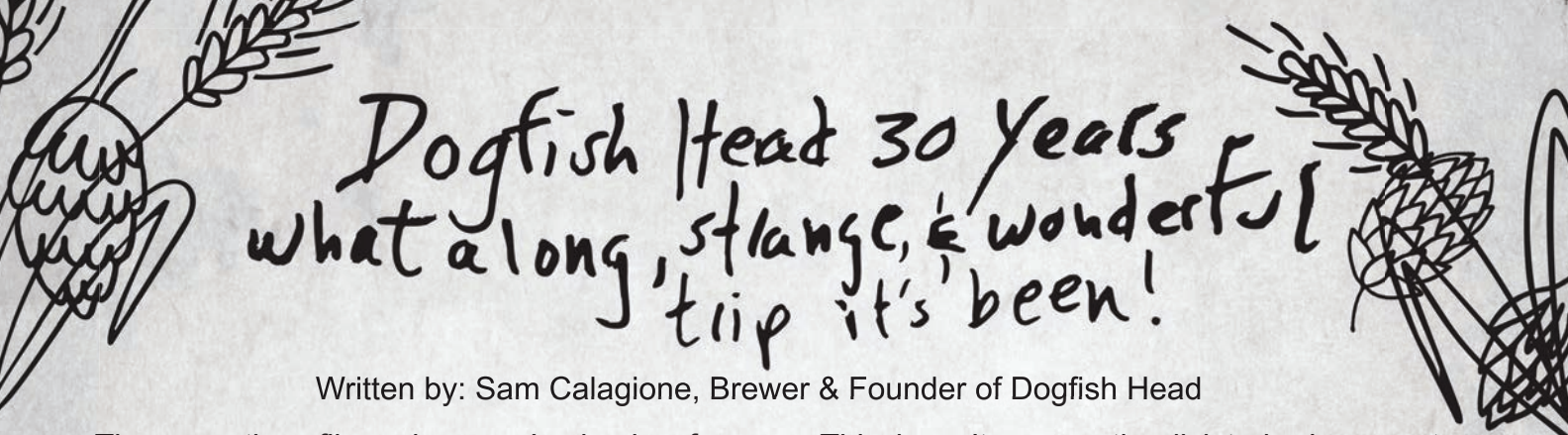
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Craft Brewers Conference, April 20 - 22 in Philadelphia.



Dogfish Head 30 Years what a long, strange, & wonderful trip it's been!

Written by: Sam Calagione, Brewer & Founder of Dogfish Head

They say time flies when you're having fun. At Dogfish Head, we've been a company obsessed with time for over 30 years. From 30 Minute to 60 Minute, our 90 Minute to 120 Minute, we've been so proud of our creative journey and learned so much from this wonderful craft brewing community along the way.

When Dogfish opened in 1995, we had the dubious distinction of being the smallest commercial brewery in America. When I wrote the business plan for Dogfish Head in the early 90s, I studied the wonderful first-generation craft brewers that came before us. From Sierra Nevada to Redhook, to Sam Adams and Stoudts, each was putting their own creative thumbprint on super fresh, locally produced interpretations of modern European beer styles.

I knew that as a waiter with zero business experience, I wasn't going to be able to raise a lot of money to open Dogfish Head. I also knew I had to figure out a really distinct and well differentiated positioning for our little brewery if we were going to stand out among this wonderful set of brewers who opened the doors before us.

When I wrote my business plan, I committed on the first page that Dogfish Head would be the first commercial brewery dedicated to brewing the majority of our beers outside the Reinheitsgebot, incorporating culinary ingredients into our recipes in unexpected and adventurous ways.

This doesn't seem outlandish today in a country with nearly 10,000 breweries, where many make beers like fruited sours and pastry stouts with culinary ingredients, but that was not the beer landscape when Dogfish opened in 1995. In fact, I would go to local beer festivals and the beer fans back in that era sometimes would laugh at us or yell at us for putting chicory into a stout or raisins into a Belgian-style beer, saying we were being disrespectful of tradition.

We stuck to our guns and kept brewing the beers we believed in. We painted a giant Ralph Waldo Emerson quotation on the brewery wall that became our rallying cry: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."

In the late 90s, we began getting recognition for the creative beers we were making and the risks we were taking, commercializing unexpected and adventurous off-centered ales for off-centered people.

I've been fortunate to collaborate with so many bands, artists, and brand-builders throughout these 30 years, and I've learned so much from each of them. Getting to spend time with the folks that run New Balance, LL Bean and Yvon Chouinard, who founded Patagonia, have been highlights of my career. When you look at iconoclastic brands like these three and so many others that have lasted and thrived over many decades, I feel like they share three common pillars, a maniacal focus on:

1. Commerce
2. creativity
3. community building



I'm very lucky to have met my business partner and wife, Mariah, when we were teenagers at a high school in western Massachusetts. In a lot of ways, my creative career has been inspired by my efforts to woo and impress Mariah from the day I met her, first trying to become her boyfriend and then with my ideas to create this special company that we would run together.

We also know that for us to build this special company, we had to focus on community building, and that starts with the amazing coworkers we've been blessed with in our 30-year journey at Dogfish Head.

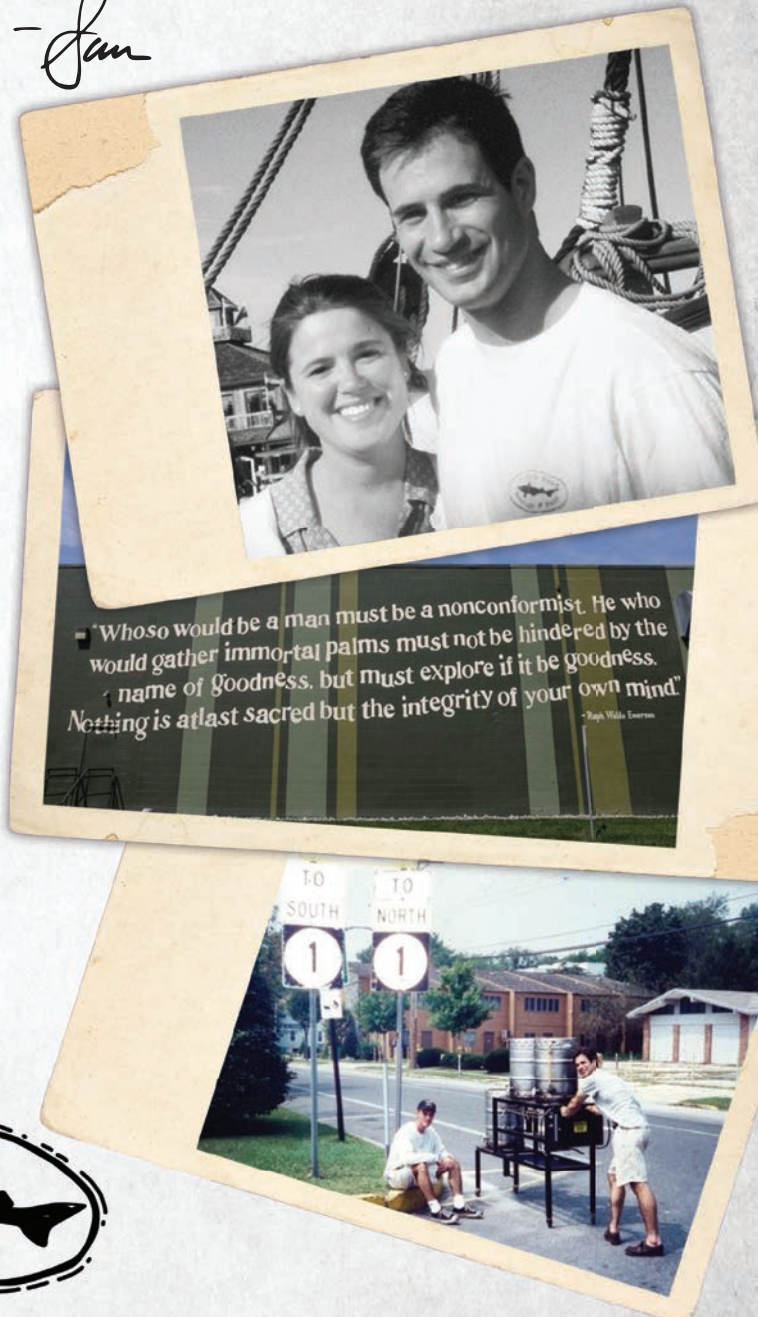
We're proud that Dogfish Head is growing right now, but we know these are frustrating and hard times for many of our craft brewing brethren. We all have a challenge in front of us to make craft beer exciting and enticing for today's younger legal drinking age people. Right now, that cohort is drinking less alcohol than 21- to 31-year-olds have been drinking since pretty much the era of prohibition. I believe the catalyst for our return to growth as a craft brewing community is doubling down on the hospitality and creative options we provide at our own locations, our tasting rooms, our tap rooms, the restaurants and bars that sell what we make to get people out and to socialize, to get younger people more comfortable being uncomfortable, meeting new people, making new friends, falling in love with beer, with food and with socializing. I truly think craft beer as the drink of moderation can play the role in this needed evolution to spark us back to growth.

In the craft brewing community, "white whale" is the term that describes highly sought-after, limited-edition beers. When I look at the scene from the original American adventure story of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, I think of all of us.

This community of 10,000 indie craft brewers in one boat together, rowing toward the next great white whale, the next IPA or whatever style that we're going to figure out together and amplify together and grow explosively together. Something that will return growth to the craft brewing commercial landscape. I know our passion collectively has not waned and the courage that so many of my craft brewing brothers and sisters have shown during the more recent challenging times continues to inspire me as much as our coworkers do every day.

We are very proud to be part of this community. Cheers to the next 30 years!

- Sam



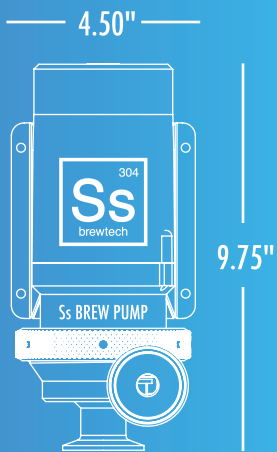


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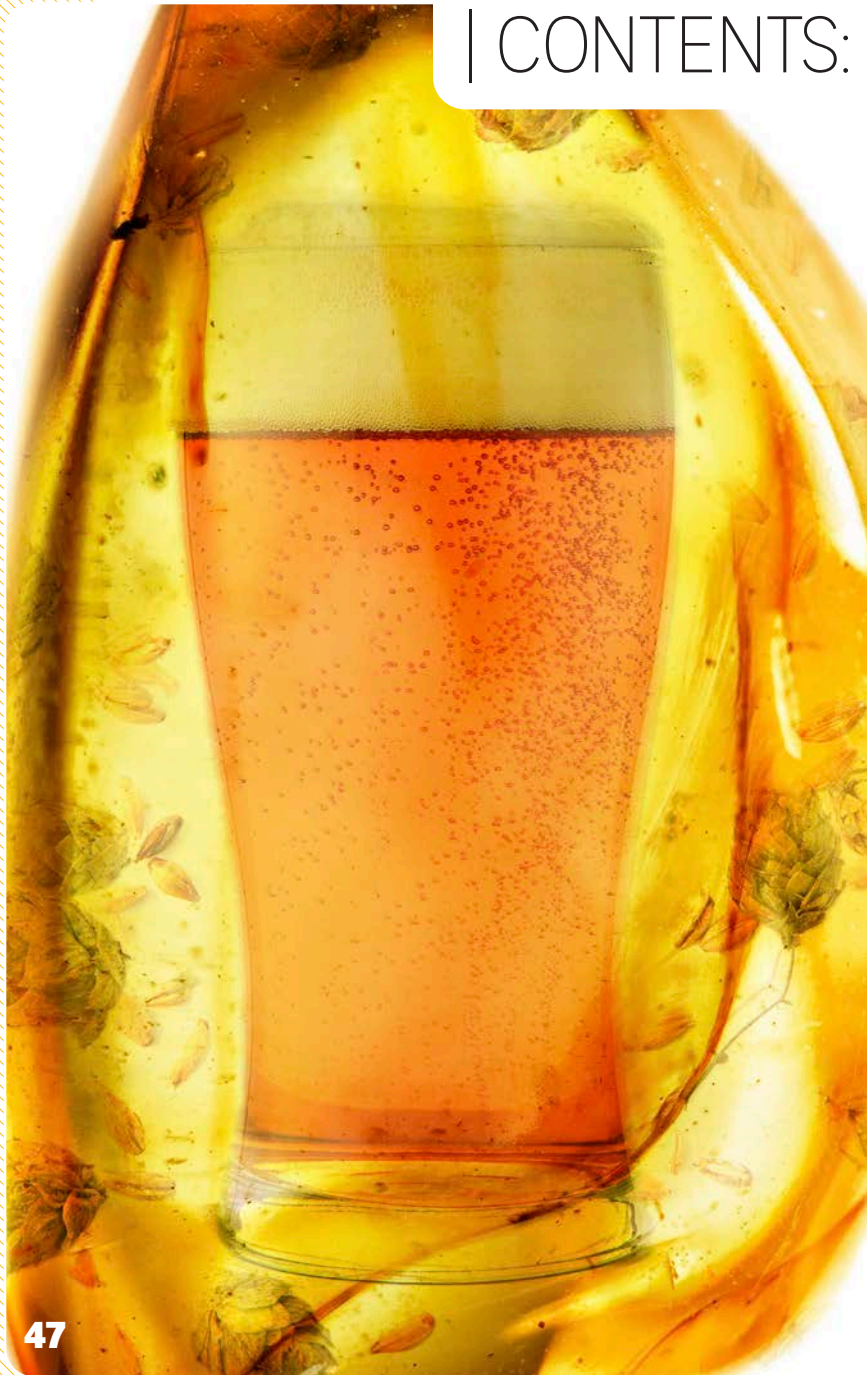


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| CONTRIBUTORS IN THIS ISSUE |



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Lucy Corne is an award-winning beer writer, educator, and Africa's first Advanced Cicerone. She's written two books on South African beer, and numerous international beer publications have published her work. She cofounded the African Beer Cup with her husband Shawn; they live in Cape Town with their son.



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Matt Graves is a Fort Collins-based photographer who has been turning dad jokes into pictures since 2007. Along with shooting photos for every issue of *Craft Beer & Brewing Magazine*® since No. 1, he shoots for various commercial and editorial clients. See more of his work at mgravesphoto.com.



Lars Marius Garshol is an author and researcher on traditional farmhouse brewing, for which he trawls archive collections, collects old documents, and goes on expeditions to remote corners of Europe. He's the author of *Historical Brewing Techniques* and writes the imaginatively titled *Larsblog*.

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“An authentic view is one in which you do not reduce your understanding to a definition about which you then claim certainty—that is what it is, we’ve pinned it down—but rather a constant ongoing quest into what the virtues are, what it is to be good, for example, with an understanding that you’re probably always going to be asking that question as long as you are a living, ethical being.” —Stephen Batchelor



I WAS LISTENING TO THE

Ezra Klein podcast from *The New York Times* the other day as he interviewed prominent Buddhist philosopher and author Stephen Batchelor; the quote above compelled me to pull the car over and quickly transcribe it. I’m entirely sure that Batchelor’s mind wasn’t anywhere near beer styles, or even creative criticism more broadly, when he uttered it. The con-

text focused on how one chooses to live an ethical life—but it struck me in its wide-ranging potential for application.

Within our world of beer—and particularly the quirky subset of beer competitions and judging—we constantly find ourselves creating definitions and rules. On one hand, they’re necessary shorthand for creating some semblance of like grouping. It would be pretty hard to play many sports without sidelines and endlines, for example. The challenge arises, however, when we start to view these definitions—style guidelines and so on—as something static and not dynamic; as something real and permanent and not just a descriptive snapshot taken at one point in time.

The reality, of course, is messier. Cuisine and beverages evolve. Palates shift and change. Trends grip popular culture, and things fall in and out of style.

For beer, that means that competition categories and style definitions must constantly evolve. For us, that means the work, by its very nature, can never stop. There will never be a year where we can say, “This is going to be our final Best in Beer issue because nothing will be better than this ever again.” Likewise, we approach each new quarterly issue—typically organized around consistent themes—with a fresh approach every year, searching for what’s evolving, seeking out new stories that connect to beer’s history, and watching closely as brewers themselves shift the narratives in both subtle and groundbreaking ways.

We won’t stop watching and listening, with open and inquisitive minds, and we hope you won’t, either. Being authentic requires that ongoing quest, and it’s our job to never stop asking those questions.

Jamie Bogner

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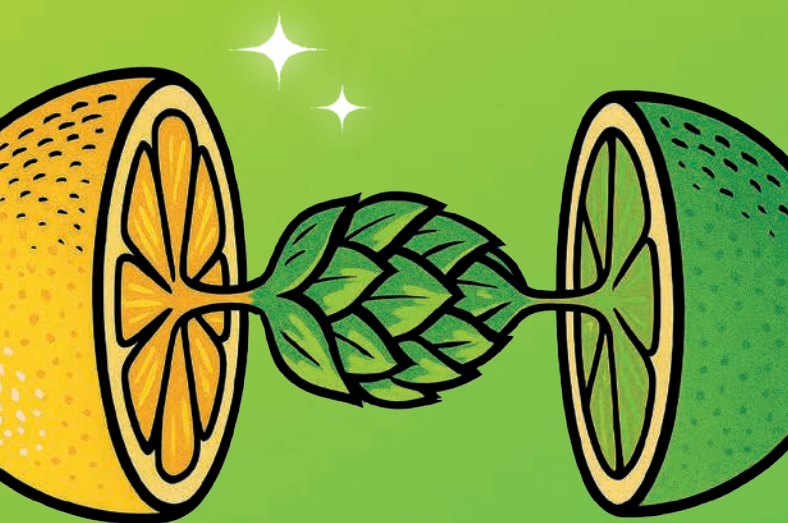
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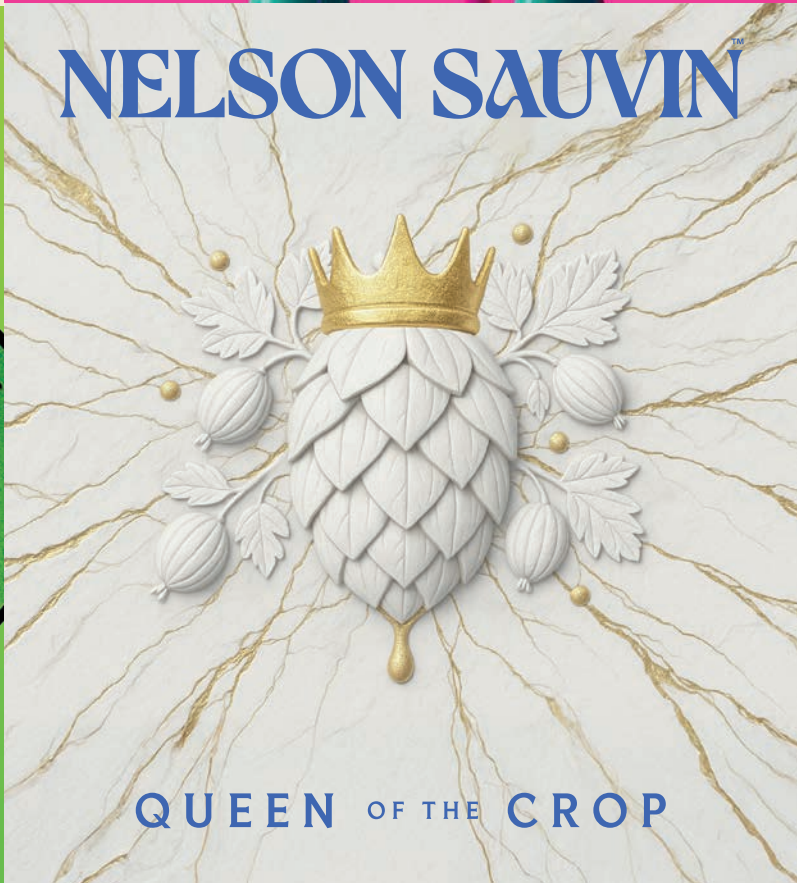
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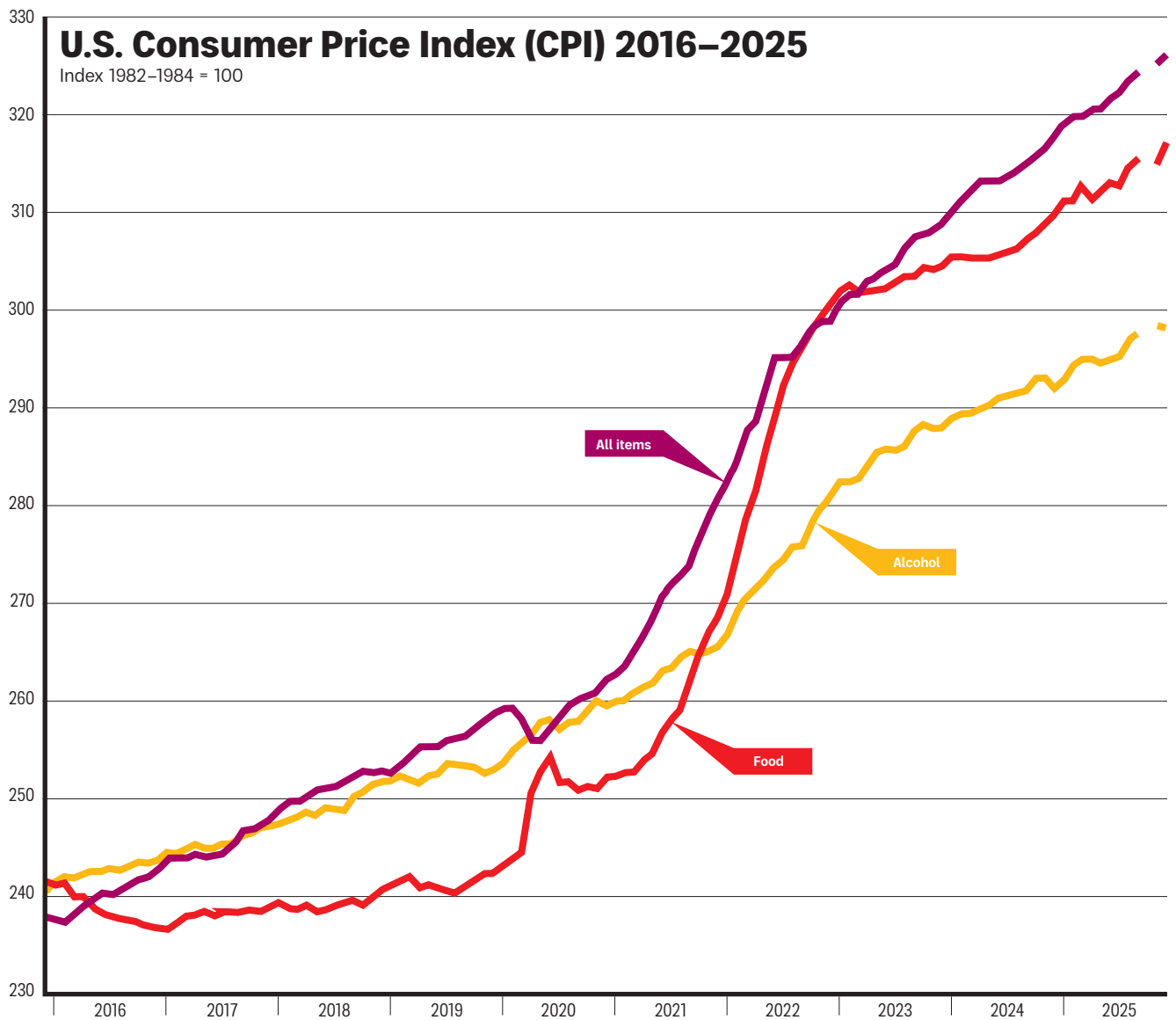


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The Rising Price of Alcohol?

It seems like everything is getting more expensive these days, but what about the price of beer, and of alcoholic beverages more broadly? According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, since late 2021, the alcoholic beverage category of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) has been tracking significantly under the general index for all items and under the index for the food category. (The CPI uses an index number—normalized to 100 in the 1982–84 base period—to measure price changes over time.) Here, we’ve charted the price-index increases over the past decade.



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics via FRED®

Editors' Picks



Get Pumped!

From beer-barreled whiskey to brewery hikes and your new favorite player in the transfer portal, here are a few things we're stoked on, now.

Brewer's Coalition Whiskey

Virginia Distillery, various expressions \$49.99–\$54.99
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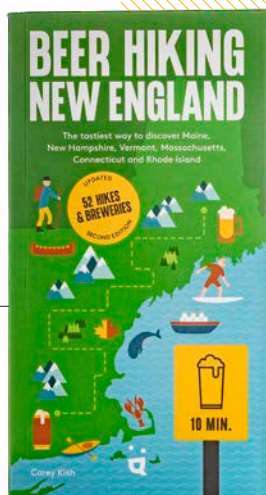
While beer is our first love, we have a similar passion for interesting and creative distilled spirits—it's all one extended family, after all—and this series from Virginia Distillery brings them both together in a process mashup that also makes flavor sense. The conceit? Take those spirits barrels that brewers then used to age beer and bring them back to the spirits world for another round of cask maturation, post-beer.

If you've tasted white whiskey before it's barreled, you'll understand just how much character the spirit derives from that wooden vessel, and the same can be said for this series: The blenders clearly lean into the barrel character, with cask flavor profiles that complement the whiskey. The samples we tasted—finished in casks that once held Hardywood Gingerbread Stout and Central Waters Black Gold stout—each showcased smart use of blending as well as the beer flavor's impact. The Hardywood edition amplified the cinnamon and baking spice, while the Central Waters embraced cooler chocolate tones.

The core American single-malt base provides a characterful palate—not quite as sweet as bourbon, thankfully, with grain notes that should appeal to beer lovers. Other editions in the series include contributions from Boulevard and Foot-hills—and, based on private conversations we've had with brewers we can't name yet—we're excited about the future projects they have coming down the pipeline.

Building new experiences and blending audiences with this kind of collaboration is great for beer and great for spirits. Now, we'll have to put some energy into designing the perfect cocktails for these. —J.B.

PHOTOS: JAMIE BOGNER



Beer Hiking Series

Helvetiq, \$24.99
helvetiq.com

There are so far a dozen books in this series, and they cover a range of North American geographies—from New England and Quebec to Southern California. The premise is simple: Great hikes are best finished with a great beer (or two). The various authors curate a diverse selection of hikes and pair each with a beer from a local brewery, within range of the trailhead, and the fun design packs a lot of information into an easy-to-digest format. We don't need an excuse to crack open a cold one, but these books provide just the right push to get out and explore. —J.B.

Ss Brew Pump

Ss Brewtech, \$249.95
SsBrewtech.com

Ss Brewtech excels at taking top-tier tech and scaling it down for homebrewers and nanobrewers, and this new pump does just that—it takes what they've learned producing professional brewhouses and brings that bulletproof mentality to pumps at a homebrew price point. The heavy one-piece stainless pump head is removable for cleaning, and the detail in the machining of the inner surfaces is impressive—it's substantial, built to tight tolerances, and designed to go the distance. Stay tuned: We'll follow up with long-term thoughts after Joe puts it to use with his own Ss Brewtech system. —J.B.



The Rundown

The latest events, podcasts, and more from the Craft Beer & Brewing Magazine® team

Upcoming Craft Beer & Brewing Events and Dates to Know

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- Mar 6** It's the deadline for submissions to our 2026 lager-focused issue. help.beerandbrewing.com
- Apr 20** Heading to CBC? Get tickets to see a live taping of the podcast, featuring Vinnie Cilurzo, Kelsey McNair, Evan Price, and special surprise guests! beerandbrewing.com/podcasts
- June 5** It's the deadline for submissions to our 2026 IPA-focused issue. help.beerandbrewing.com
- Aug 23** The annual Brewer's Retreat heads to hop country! Tickets are almost sold out, as of press time, so move quickly if you don't want to miss this special event! brewersretreat.com



The Latest from the Craft Beer & Brewing Podcast

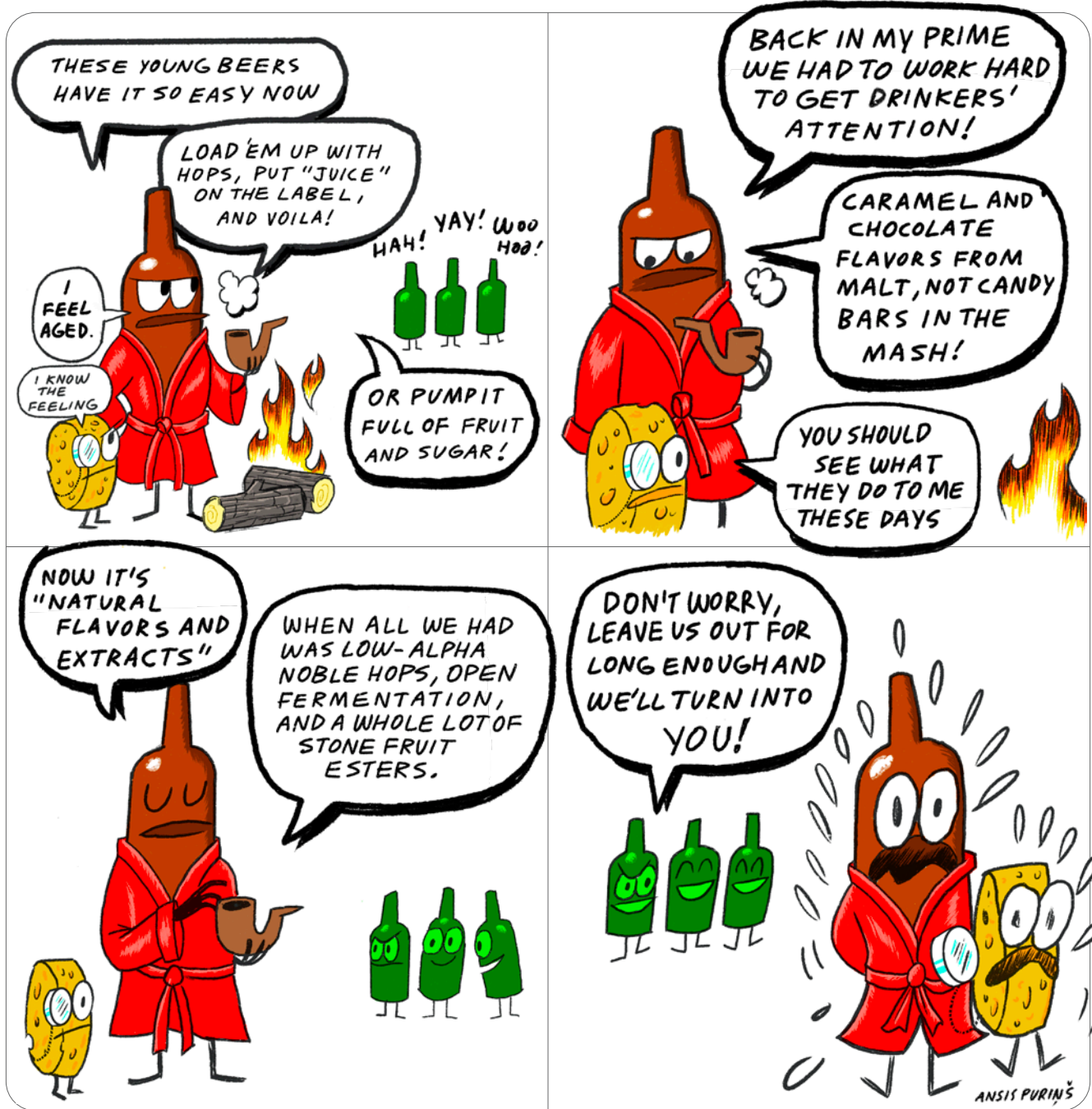


- Ep.441** Cask Ale Elegance and Understatement with Bill Arnott of Machine House
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Whalez, Bro: Life in Hell

By Ansis Puriņš





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Portland, Oregon

Airport pub with concourse views and a vast selection of local beers

What it is: When Portland International Airport unveiled the results of a three-year renovation project in August 2024, it invited blinking passengers into a bio-cathedral built of Douglas fir. Six dozen large trees add to the evocation of the Oregon woods as shafts of light fall from skylights as if to the forest floor. The best way to take in this splendor? That would be this outpost of beer-savvy Portland institution Loyal Legion, whose airport pub has 96 taps and a view of the whole concourse.

Why it's great: Sitting one story above the hubbub, drinkers can settle into comfy faux-leather chairs and drink from a vast menu of local beers—virtually all from Oregon—or enjoy cider, wine, or cocktails. The food is eclectic, including a fan-favorite artisanal corndog—a treat that may have been invented in Oregon—and many plant-based selections. It's not just a great airport pub—it's one of the best pubs in the city, full stop. Located outside the security gates in Terminal 2, it's accessible to the public and an ideal place to gather before or after a flight. Oh, and local policy caps the airport's food and drink prices, so they cost about the same as they would downtown. —*Jeff Alworth*

Hours: 9 a.m.–11 p.m., daily

Address: 7000 NE Airport Wy, Portland, OR

Web: loyallegionbeerhall.com/pdx/



Golding's Free Dive

Wellington, New Zealand

Back-alley pub serving kiwi craft, pizza, and plenty of kitsch

What it is: In New Zealand's capital city, this local favorite feels hidden to the visitors who venture a block off busier downtown streets to find its alleyway niche. Sean Golding opened his Free Dive in 2013 to pay homage to North American dive bars. Walking in, Star Wars fans will feel right at home amid various starships and action figures decking the walls and ceiling—plus multicolored lights, skis over the bar, bucket lamps, a bit of taxidermy, mismatched furniture, and a striking mural that proclaims, “beer is love.”

Why it's great: That love—besides friendly, chatty bar service—comes in the form of seven rotating taps plus more cans and bottles full of New Zealand craft, from locals Garage Project and Parrot Dog to Christchurch's Beer Baroness down south to the highly regarded McLeod's of Waipu up north. Then there are the tasty pies from neighboring Pizza Pomodoro, with a surprising variety that runs from classic Margherita to the chile-and-anchovy-laden Inferno. It's also dog-friendly, and there's outdoor seating when the weather rewards it. —*Alexander Gates & Joe Stange*

Hours: noon to 11 p.m., daily

Address: 5G, 14 Leeds St, Te Aro, Wellington

Web: goldingsfreedive.co.nz

IG: @goldingsfd



Joseph Bar

Panaji, Goa, India

Cold local beers, a famous cocktail, and layers of Goan atmosphere

What it is: In the heart of Fontainhas, Panaji's storied Latin Quarter, Joseph Bar is a small, vibrant tavern offering a quintessentially Goan experience. It originally opened in the 1970s; current owner Atish Fernandes revived it in 2017, aiming to preserve Goa's unique “third-space” culture—a longstanding tradition in which locals gather, relax, and connect outside of home and work. It's cozy—there are only about 30 seats between the interior and open-air tables; locals and travelers fill them up to create a warm, lively community vibe. Known for its relaxed, rustic interior, Joseph's is an old-school tavern whose walls speak of decades of history.

Why it's great: Among other strengths, Joseph Bar is a gateway to Goa's emerging craft-beer scene, offering cold local bottles such as People's Lager and Eight Finger Eddie IPA from Goa Brewing, or English Ale and Kölsch from Susegado, the state's first microbrewery. Beyond the beer, Joseph's is chiefly a *feni* bar, serving the traditional Goan spirit distilled from cashew apples or coconut sap. Feni features in the bar's locally famous, vividly red tambde rosa cocktail, made with tart kokum fruit and lime, and garnished with rose petals. The menu features snacks from nearby home kitchens, delivered with the humor and hospitality of legendary barman Gundu. This is where to better understand Goa beyond its beaches, unwinding with friends or making new ones. —*Abhinav Reddy*

Hours: noon to 11 p.m., daily

Address: Gomes Pereira Rd, Panaji, Goa

IG: @josephbarpanjim

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PICK SIX

Process, Place, POV, Perfection

In St. Petersburg, Florida, **Green Bench** produces a wide range of beer styles, from Belgian-inspired saisons to German- and Czech-style lagers and various IPAs. But the beers that have most influenced cofounder and brewer **Khristopher Johnson** are those that showcase a particular blend of localized expression, integrated process, and disciplined focus. **As told to Jamie Bogner**

I FOUND THIS RATHER CHALLENGING— it's hard to narrow it down to just six beers—but I settled on beers that inspire me, and these are all beers that I carry with me a little bit. I think about them often, and I reference them often, whether that's looking them up for information or trying to recall that experience, so I can formulate that experience in a beer myself. I like beer, so it makes it tough.

Blaugies La Vermontoise **Blaugies, Hainaut, Belgium**

I think about saison and farmhouse ales often, and I have a long list of ones that matter to me and that I love. But La Vermontoise to this day is one I find not just inspiring, but also it's one of the most delicious examples of saison I've tasted. Thank God it's a collab they make often and not just a one-time thing.

Blaugies is one of my favorite beer producers, and I've loved pretty much every beer I've had from them. What I love about La Vermontoise is that it delivers all of the fermentation character from their traditional saison. The bottle conditioning is always highly effervescent, it has really nice dryness and, like all of their farmhouse beers, it has so much pillowy body for something that's so dry. Their yeast profile is I think one of the most intriguing—it's developed, it's citrus, it's a lot of earth, it's full of delicate phenolics that play so well together, with some of the esters that yeast produces. It ferments wildly warm, it's expressive, and the Hill Farmstead influence on that beer is

remarkable. It's delicate yet heavy-handed, if that makes sense. American things are generally heavy-handed; it's what we do. But it's so well integrated into these beers that it doesn't take it off course—it's still a Blaugies beer, and it tastes like Blaugies.

It's super inspiring, as an American brewer who loves these things. It's a melding of my two worlds—this American Amarillo hop and this tradition that's sacred and gorgeous and something we're always chasing. It's a combination of New World exploration and boundary-pushing, with the softest landing you could possibly have in something so traditional. I've been inspired by so many saisons over the years, and as that path has weaved back and forth, this beer has been a constant guidepost. It's a major inspiration for the flavor profile of our Saison de Banc Vert.

Augustiner Lagerbier Hell **Munich, Bavaria, Germany**

This is another beer I think about all the time, and especially now—it's cold everywhere else, but it's hot here right now. To me, this is one of the few gold stars for the style. Of the Münchner helles, it's my favorite and the one I'm trying to chase—particularly its balance and drinkability.

It's extremely malt-driven and yet so dry—a technical challenge. It can be unassuming, and that's part of what I love about it. You can drink it without thinking about it, and it's designed that way. But as a brewer, understanding how to make something so malt-driven and ingredient-based with that Barke and honey-malt expression,

and yet make it so dry and drinkable—it's a challenging technical accomplishment. Most brewers aren't going to have the technology or equipment or frankly even the mentorship or know-how to pull that kind of thing off. So, it has turned for me into a multiyear, ongoing process to understand how they do that and then work a similar character into our lager. I can drink Maß after Maß of this beer.

I love its yeast expression, clean but with personality. At different times of the year, you might get slightly different character based on how much they have to push out. Summertime, people drink a lot of it. But the beer cleans up nicely. It's interesting and intriguing yet still delicate. It doesn't taste like nothing, yet you can consume it like it does. That balance is so challenging, and I have deep respect for how they've done it. I should footnote this by adding that their Edelstoff accomplishes the same goal—they're both extraordinary.

Allagash White **Portland, Maine**

Allagash is admittedly one of my favorite breweries in the world, and for most brewers that's not much of a stretch. There are a bunch of things I love about this beer, and the first is that there are very few beers made anywhere outside of their style's place of origin that are as good or better when compared to those quintessential examples from that place. For example, I'd be hard-pressed to find an American pale ale better than Sierra Nevada Pale Ale—it's the definition of that style. But I think Allagash White stands up favorably against any example of the style. As an American, I take pride in that.

I love the people there—founder Rob Tod, brewmaster Jason Perkins—and the idea that Rob made that one beer for so long, and he pushed it and pushed it until it became one of the most incredible success stories for a traditional European beer style in the United States, outside of lager. That makes it even more impressive.

Not only is the beer that good, but I love the stubbornness or eagerness to say, "This is going to be the one that represents us and what we're passionate about." They put so much back into their people, into the land, into the community—it makes it even easier to drink the beer when you don't have to compromise any values to do it.

It's a corner of the market that is strictly Allagash's, and it should be. It's not a beer that any other brewery should lead with, and yet it is and will continue to be more successful than most of our beers. They've not only preserved the historic style—they've added to its story.



Timothy Taylor's Landlord Keighley, West Yorkshire, England

I don't get this beer often. It's not something we can buy in Florida, and the last time I was in the U.K. was right before COVID—everything was about to shut down, and I was in London then Manchester. I obviously looked everywhere I could to drink this beer on cask and found it in a few different pubs. It's a quintessential example of English bitter, and what I love about it is that every other bitter recipe you'll see is typically a Maris Otter base. While I love the flavor of that, what makes Landlord special is that it's a 100 percent Golden Promise beer. It's all Simpsons Golden Promise malt, and still to this day it uses invert sugar.

The beer has an insane malt backbone as a result of that process, and it stands up to a pretty intense hop load. They use whole-cone Goldings hops, and it's so flowery, the texture is incredible. Obviously, it's best via cask engine. I just want to cozy up, find a quiet corner to sit all day long, and I want that pint to keep coming. It's malt-forward, has a beautiful backbone, the palate is soft and textured, the hop character is intense and flowery and earthy, and on top of that is an incredible, expressive yeast profile that comes from open fermentation—this Yorkshire yeast that they've spent generations developing and growing and taking care of. It's an example of an experience you can't get anywhere else, and there's nothing else I want this beer to be when I'm experiencing it in that moment.

The last time I had Timothy Taylor's was a few years ago at CBC, at the Simpsons' booth in the BSG section. I'd talked about that beer with them previously, so when they saw me, they said, "Hey check this out," and they opened a cooler with a bunch of bottles of fresh Timothy Taylor's. I drank a bottle and a half with them, and it was all chaos—everyone walking around and talking—but it made my day. It was as fresh as it could get, as they brought it right over. It's a beer I think about a lot—I think about that experience, that balance, and that tradition. It stands out as the best beer of that style I've ever had.

Poperings Hommelbier Boezinge, West Flanders, Belgium

I had this beer at the source a few years ago on a trip to Belgium. I flew into Brussels, rented a car, and we drove to Poperinge near the French border in Western Flanders—it's the biggest hop-growing region in the country. You're near St. Bernardus, you're near Westvleteren, and hops are just a big part of this town.

I rented this cottage, and when I opened the front door, it was just hop fields across the street, and if I opened the back door, there was a balcony overlooking this beautiful green field with a pond and a tree hanging foliage over it, while in the distance I could see St. Bernardus. I remember thinking, "This town rules." We were going around, trying all the beers we could, and of course the local beer is Hommelbier—"hommel" is the local dialect for hops.

They've been making the beer since 1981, and essentially, it's a showcase for the hops from this region. There's so much pride in this beer. It struck me as the most singular example of Belgian pale ale I'd ever had—so much flower, so much earthiness, such a good balance of bitterness. The yeast expression was classically Belgian, expressive but dry with a nice little alcohol warmth. The bitterness was so clean, with a depth to it that wasn't edging out, but progressing as the sweetness was progressing. I don't know how they did it—the bitterness maintained itself despite the growing alcohol warmth—and I just found myself at every café saying, "That's what I want."

I drank pils, I drank tripel. But that beer was so insanely balanced and probably the best hoppy Belgian beer I'd ever had.

Bierstadt Lagerhaus Slow Pour Pils

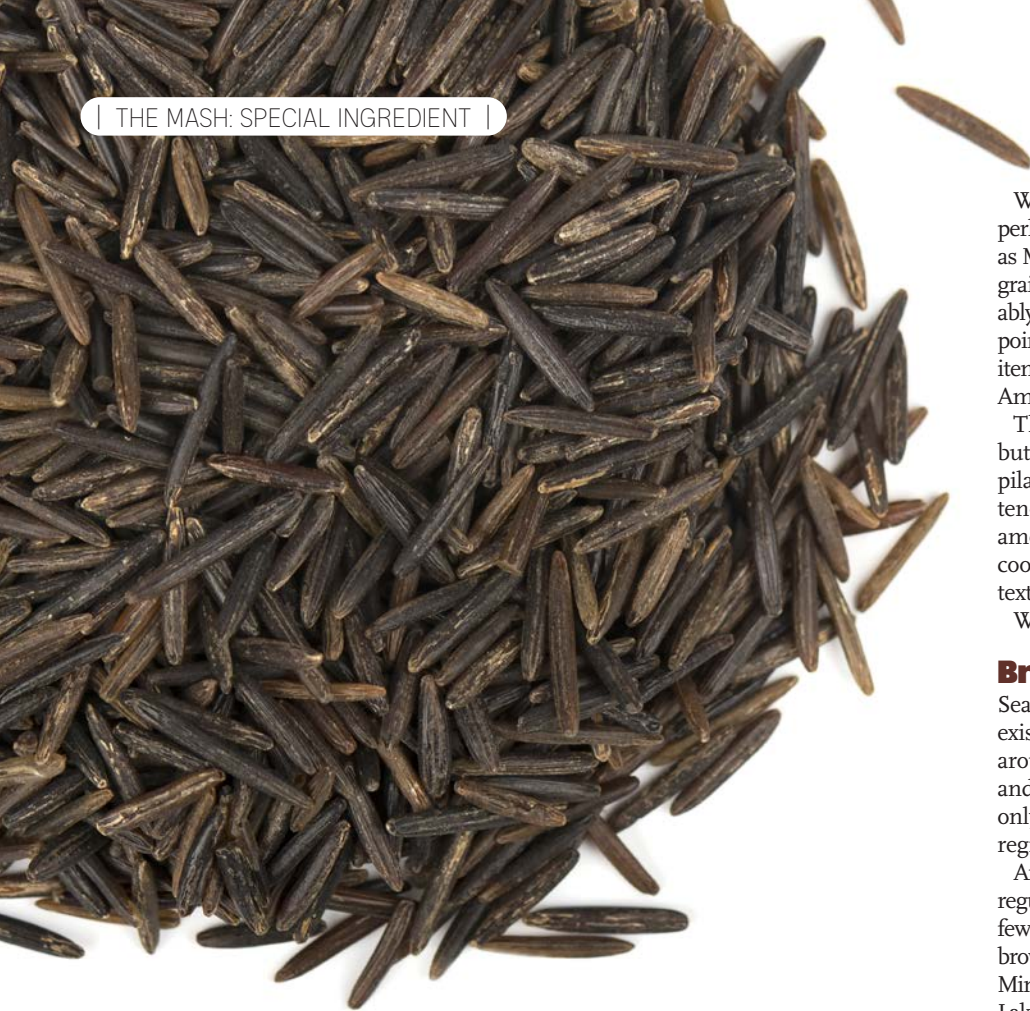
Denver

When I have this beer here in the United States, it tastes as good if not better than a lot of the examples in Germany that inspired it. It's one of the best takes on northern German-style pils that I've ever had, whether in Germany or elsewhere. It's all about Ashleigh Carter's and Bill Eye's absolute love of brewing and their incredible attention to detail. Their focus is a strength and requires a heavy level of dedication—much like Allagash and Rob Tod—and for most American brewers, that's hard to think about. We have variety, a bunch of stuff. To say, "We're just going to make this one thing or these few things" requires incredible discipline. Sure, there's more of that now in the United States than when they started, but then it was like, "How can you do this?"

But then you taste the pils, and you understand how—because it's one of the best examples I've ever had in my entire life, and likely will ever have.

I've learned so much from them and become good friends, and I'm so grateful to have found people who love what they do so much. That alone is just as inspiring as this beer and the rest of the beers that they produce. I love their passion for it.

Hell, the first time I had Augustiner at the source was with Bill. There are few people I'd rather drink beers with, and particularly beers of this style, this drinkability, this clarity of purpose—their unwillingness to deviate from what it takes to make the best version of this thing they love. It's easy to take what we do for granted, but every time I taste their beers, they make me feel like everything is worth it. It's all worth it.



Wild Rice

This truly indigenous, widely available American grain offers nutty, earthy flavors that would seem to be compatible with malt-forward beer. Yet relatively few breweries have tried it. **By Joe Stange**

IF YOU LOOK HARD enough, especially in the Upper Midwest, you can certainly find a few beers made with wild rice. However—and this is easy for me to say—there ought to be more of them.

The more I learn and think about wild rice—which, like corn, is a truly indigenous American grain—the more I believe it ought to be more entrenched in our continent’s craft-beer landscape. It could have its own signature style—a wild rice brown ale, perhaps, or an amber lager—that every brewery in Minnesota or the wider Great Lakes region feels like they must make or else the locals get cranky.

Yet relatively few breweries have given it a try. Maybe it’s too expensive or challenging to use in the brewhouse. Perhaps, like brown ale itself, its nutty, earthy flavors just aren’t that fashionable. Whatever the reasons, wild rice remains a niche ingredient—but let’s consider its attributes anyway, and let’s ponder whether it may have greater potential in the craft brewery.

What Is Wild Rice, Really?

A much-repeated fact is that wild rice isn’t technically a rice at all (and, when cultivated, isn’t technically wild, either). That is factual enough for taxonomic reasons: Proper Asian rice belongs to the *Oryza* genus, while wild rice has its own, *Zizania*. Does it matter? Ultimately, like rice, it’s an edible grass seed—a true grain—and one that loves to grow in water.

There are a few different species, but the one most North Americans know best is *Zizania palustris*, or Northern wild rice, native to the Great Lakes region. Nobody domesticated wild rice as a crop in the modern sense until the middle of the 20th century, but the Anishinaabe and other indigenous peoples were harvesting it for centuries before Europeans arrived. It remains culturally (and culinarily) important for many North American tribes. There are even two towns—Mahnomen, Minnesota, and Menomonie, Wisconsin—that get their names from the Ojibwa name for wild rice, *manoomin*.

While wild rice grows in many places, perhaps no state identifies with it as much as Minnesota, where it’s the official state grain. Yet most North Americans have probably encountered wild rice as food at some point—even if not at home. It’s a specialty item in many restaurants, and virtually every American supermarket carries it.

There are many ways to cook wild rice, but many of us associate it with soups, pilafs, or casseroles. It’s dark in color, gluten-free, and relatively high in protein—among grains, only oats have more. Once cooked, it tends to have a nicely chewy texture and distinctly nutty, earthy flavor.

What’s it do for beer, then?

Brewing with Wild Rice

Search online, and you’ll find that many existing wild-rice beers are clustered around the Great Lakes, in both Canada and the United States—but even so, only a small minority of breweries in the region appear to have made one.

An even smaller minority has made it a regular offering. Among them, to name a few examples: Boundary Waters Brunette, a brown ale from Voyageur in Grand Marais, Minnesota; Tippy Canoe, a pale lager from Lake of the Woods in Kenora, Ontario; and 46 North, a blonde ale from the recently shuttered Roundhouse in Nisswa, Minnesota.

Another brewery that regularly offers a beer made from wild rice is Northbound Smokehouse & Brewpub in Minneapolis. (You might remember their award-winning bocks from our Fall 2025 issue; see “Brewer’s Perspective: Eisbock It with Northbound,” beerandbrewing.com.) In fact, Northbound offers two wild-rice beers: the Wild Rice Amber Bock lager and Wild Brunette, a brown ale.

Founder and brewer Jamie Robinson says the ingredient adds an earthiness, nuttiness, and a note of vanilla to those beers. It also adds a regional connection.

“Our branding, logo, beer names, food, and decor are all northern Minnesota-themed, which makes wild rice a perfect ingredient for our brand,” Robinson says. (Northbound even puts wild rice into a veggie burger that was hearty enough for Guy Fieri to feature it on *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives*.)

Northbound sources wild rice from the Mille Lacs Wild Rice Corporation in Aitkin, Minnesota. Mille Lacs produces the Canoe brand of wild-rice products, and the company has steered some of its marketing efforts toward craft brewers. (In transparency, Canoe has been an advertising partner in our magazine and podcasts.) Canoe sells cultivated wild rice as well as harvested—the latter is collected from local streams rather than farmed.

Robinson says they buy the harvested type—and specifically, they want the broken bits, aka the “brewer’s grade” wild rice. “The smaller, broken pieces cook faster and have more surface area,” he says. They’re also less expensive.

The Northbound team prepares the wild rice in a cereal mash—but not in the brewhouse. “We are a small brewpub brewing on a seven-barrel system, with no cereal cooker,” Robinson says. “However, since we *are* a brewpub, we have a kitchen. We get in early in the morning, before the cooks arrive, and use every pot we have to cook the wild rice before we mash in. We simmer it for about 45 minutes, or until the rice is soft enough to turn into a paste when pressed between your fingers. Then, all of the wild rice and the water it was cooked in are dumped into the mash with the rest of the malt bill.”

There are a couple pitfalls to avoid when brewing with wild rice—and one is a stuck mash.

“You’ll need a fair amount of rice hulls to lighten up the mash bed from all of the rice,” Robinson says. “We use wild rice hulls because they carry extra desired aroma.”

Besides its more appealing flavors, Robinson says wild rice also can contribute a lot of tannins to the finished beer.

“To soften the harshness from the tannins,” he says, “we use RO water in the mash, to limit the sulfate and alkalinity that accentuate the harshness of the tannins. We also increase the dosage of kettle finings and Biofine, to drop out much of the tannins that cause that harshness.”

So, brewing with wild rice isn’t necessarily as simple as dumping it into the mash and hoping for good results—and that may be one reason why it’s rarer in craft breweries than we might expect.

There’s also the cost. Prices vary by supplier and scale, but roughly: For wild rice, you might expect to pay two to four times what you’d pay for base malt, pound for pound. At homebrew scale, unless you’re buying 50-pound bags, you might pay \$7 to \$10 a pound online or at the supermarket.

Wild Rice Lager

One Midwestern brewery that recently decided to take wild rice for a spin is suburban Chicago’s Goldfinger (recently named Favorite Lager Brewer in our 2025 Readers’ Choice poll).

Goldfinger Wild Rice Lager—available in the Downer’s Grove taproom even as I write this—is a collab with their friends at Triptych of Savoy, Illinois. Goldfinger founder-brewer Tom Beckmann says they’d been talking about it for a while, “and we were heading down the path of something classically American. ... We decided on brewing a classic American amber lager, replacing [what] may normally be regular rice with wild rice, sourcing hops from Wisconsin, and using an interesting, resurrected Midwestern lager yeast from Yeast Bay.”

They got the wild rice from Minnesota’s Canoe and kicked the brew day off with a cereal mash, combining it with some base malt and cooking at 203–212°F (95–100°C) for 20 minutes. From there, the mix went into the step mash. “We had been warned that the wild rice may be a little like cement,” Beckmann says, “but with a loose enough water-to-grist ratio, we had no issues. We ended up using some rice hulls as a precaution, but a fraction of what you’d normally use.”

And how does the wild rice’s flavor manifest in the finished beer? “Unlike regular rice and corn, it tastes exactly like wild rice,” Beckmann says. “The flavor translated through the beer, providing awesome earthy notes, nuttiness, and an interesting dark-fruit bouquet.”

For a lager brewer used to cereal mashes, decoctions, and step mashes, the wild rice presented no great challenges. “It was very easy to work with and imparts a lot of character to the finished beer,” Beckmann says. “I would highly recommend playing around with it.”



MAKE IT

Goldfinger Wild Rice Lager

A collaboration with Triptych of Savoy, Illinois, this lager from Chicago’s Goldfinger brings Midwestern flavor via Minnesota wild rice, Wisconsin hops, and a yeast strain resurrected from a 19th-century Wisconsin brewery. Goldfinger says the beer offers a creamy richness while presenting “flavors of berries, toast, nuttiness, and subtle spices.”

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons/19 liters

Brewhouse efficiency: 72%

OG: 1.044 (11°P)

FG: 1.010 (2.5°P)

IBUs: 28

ABV: 4.5%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

6.7 lb (3 kg) Rahr North Star Pils

1.1 lb (500 g) wild rice

8 oz (227 g) Weyermann Caramunich I

4 oz (113 g) acidulated malt

1.3 oz (37 g) Weyermann Carafa Special III

HOPS SCHEDULE

0.9 oz (26 g) Mt. Hood at 60 minutes [14 IBUs]

1.1 oz (31 g) Zuper Zaazer at 15 minutes [10 IBUs]

0.5 oz (14 g) Mt. Hood at 15 minutes [4 IBUs]

YEAST

Yeast Bay Cream City Lager

DIRECTIONS

First, cook the cereal mash: Mill about 1 lb (500 g) of pilsner, mix with the wild rice, and mash in at 161°F (72°C); rest 10 minutes, then bring to a boil and hold at 200–212°F (93–100°C) for 20 minutes. Mill the remaining grains, mix in cereals—cooled with water—to mash in at 135°F (57°C), and rest 15 minutes. Raise to 145°F (63°C), rest 45 minutes; raise to 162°F (72°C), rest 30 minutes; then raise to 172°F (78°C) and mash out. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle. Sparge and top up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort, depending on your evaporation rate. Boil for 90 minutes, adding hops according to the schedule. After the boil, chill to about 50°F (10°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. After the boil, chill to 50°F (10°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 50°F (10°C) for 10 days, or until complete, gravity has stabilized, and the beer has cleared a forced diacetyl test. (See “Hunting for Diacetyl,” beerandbrewing.com.) Crash to 32°F (0°C), package, and carbonate to 2.5–2.6 volumes of CO₂.

BREWER’S NOTES

Use cold water to cool the cereal mash before mixing with the malt, so you don’t denature all the enzymes. We target a pH of 5.4–5.5 in the mash and 5.1–5.2 at knockout.

GEARHEAD

Cold Liquor Gets It Done Quicker

Cold showers are trendy, and cold plunges are so hot right now—but craft breweries were taking advantage of cold water before it was, well, cool. Here's a closer look at one of the most undersung pieces of brewhouse equipment—the CLT—as well as other ways to knock out and chill. **By John M. Verive**

JOKES ABOUT CASK ALE aside, nobody wants to drink warm beer. Leaving aside medieval breakfast soups and festive flips sizzled by red-hot pokers, hot beer is not often enjoyed—either by humans or yeast.

Pitching temperature is a make-or-break point in the brewing process simply because most yeast are so sensitive to the environment in which they live, eat, and reproduce. Just ask any homebrewer without an effective chiller about all the ways off-flavors can develop during that transition from hot side to cold. Whether it's oxidation, unwelcome organisms gaining a foothold, or the more delicate impacts of yeast health and metabolism, controlling the temperature of wort is crucial for quality—and that's before vig-

orous fermentation begins in a temperature-controlled vessel.

“For us,” says Mark Fischer, brewery operations director at Firestone Walker, “the brewing process starts with making freezing-cold water.”

In the textbook example of a modern brewery, this crucial chilling process involves what looks like the most unexciting piece of stainless steel in the whole building: the **cold-liquor tank**, or CLT. Simply used to store cold water, the CLT is more important and impressive than it appears at first glance: It serves not only as a reservoir of water, but also as a reservoir of thermal energy.

It's a key piece of what should be a highly energy-efficient system—a core node in the brewery's network of thermal regulation.

Thermodynamics, but with Beer

Brewing, it turns out, is all about heat management. From the mash to the sparge to the boil, precise temperature control is required to consistently brew great beer.

Once the boil and whirlpool are done, the resulting wort is more than the sum of its grains, hops, and water. Coaxed along by attentive brewers, that wort also is a particular product of its hot-side processes—mash temperatures and times, boil length and vigor, various whirlpool choices. We're investing thermal energy in the liquid—it's a significant outlay—and we must protect the vulnerable wort. Then, we'll invest a different type of thermal energy to cool the wort as quickly (and economically) as possible before handing it over to our cold-side yeast force (see “Gearhead: Yeast Just Want to Have Fun,” beerandbrewing.com).

Historically, brewers used a variety of methods to nudge along the cooling process. **Coolships** provided large surface areas for evaporative cooling—energy-efficient, sure, but also relatively slow. Once the wort drops below a certain temperature, it also becomes more susceptible to wild yeast and bacteria; today, we mainly associate these impressively large cooling pans with acidic Old World brews.

“For us, the brewing process starts with making freezing-cold water.”



Cold liquor tank at KC Bier in Kansas City

The Industrial Age produced other contraptions. In the 19th century, French inventor Jean Louis Baudelot created a cooling device for the brewing industry. In the **Baudelot cooler**, hot wort flowed downward over a copper plate while cool spring water flowed through copper tubes in contact with the plate's reverse side. That cut down chilling times significantly, and many breweries adopted Baudelots or similar coolers. It's sometimes called a **falling film surface cooler**, and various industries still use modern versions of the device today.

In the modern craft brewery, it's the **heat exchanger (HX)** that makes hot wort cool. Be it a **shell-and-tube** variety or a **plate chiller**, heat exchangers leverage the same laws of thermodynamics as the Baudelot—namely, the first and second laws. (Those are: Heat lost by one fluid is gained by another, and heat flows from a hot fluid into a cold fluid.) The heat exchanger prevents the hot fluid and the cold fluid from mixing while keeping the temperature differential as large as possible by running the two fluids in opposite directions (hence, **counterflow heat exchanger**).

There's as much math as you could want behind all those thermodynamics, but I'll spare you the details. Suffice to say, there is a constellation of equations for calculating variables such as perfect flow rates and fluid temperatures to achieve almost any desired knockout temperatures for ales or lagers. Simplify this set of equations, and you'll see the key variable is the temperature differential between the hot wort and the counter-flowing coolant.

And that's where the cold-liquor tank comes in.

Cold as Ice

"I don't know how we would brew beer without a cold liquor tank," says Eli Facchinei, cofounder of Tonewood Brewing in New Jersey. "It's super-efficient."

Tonewood's founders built efficiency into the brewery's DNA. From solar panels to boil-kettle steam recapture to a system that recovers carbon dioxide from fermentations, the Tonewood team minimizes waste and adopts sustainable practices wherever possible. The CLT is just one part of the bigger picture.

Of course, there are alternatives to installing a space-hogging tun of water in the brewery.

"Now that I think about it, when I first started brewing in Telluride, Colorado, we didn't have a CLT," Facchinei says. "We were brewing with snowmelt." In New Jersey summers, however, the municipal water supply can be 60°F (16°C). "You can't knock out a lager with 60-degree water."



Cold liquor tank at Bierstadt Lagerhaus

The obvious alternative coolant for wort-chilling is the same fluid that handles the fermentation vessels and brite tanks in the cellar: glycol. Another quietly crucial piece of infrastructure mostly unseen on brewery tours, the **glycol chiller** is the practical application of modern refrigeration, unshackling modern breweries from climate and the seasons.

A compressor chills a reservoir of a propylene-glycol solution below the freezing point of water, and pumps send the glycol to jackets that encase the fermentation vessels. That allows tight control of fermentation temperatures, and it can also allow the quick chilling of hot wort. However—more thermodynamics—adding all that heat to the glycol during knockout can over-stress the chiller, causing the temperatures in the other cellar vessels to rise. To avoid that, a brewery might invest in an oversized (and expensive) glycol chiller, or it can disconnect the fermentors from the glycol loop during knockout for however long it takes the chiller to re-cool the reservoir.

"We tried using the tiny glycol heat exchanger that came with our system," says Kirk Nishikawa, cofounder of Brewery Beer in Glendale, California. "But it overloaded

really quickly, and we didn't have enough glycol capacity to handle the load. We actually destroyed our glycol chiller prematurely trying to use it as such. That's when we realized we need a CLT of some sort."

When icy-cold water from the CLT moves through the heat exchanger, the heat moves from the wort to the water—and, ideally, that now-heated water moves on to another humble vessel: the **hot-liquor tank**, or HLT. Its on-demand supply of heated water—used for mash-in and sparging—is crucial for speedy turns of the brewhouse.

That CLT-to-HX-to-HLT pipeline means that the brewery can further harness all that energy used to boil the wort, reclaiming that heat for the next batch. That's particularly important for double batches or for production facilities with a brewhouse working around the clock.

Downsides and Alternatives

While the cold-liquor tank is a standard piece of equipment that becomes more important as production volume increases, it isn't the best solution for every brewery.

There are downsides to adding a CLT to the facility and the brewing process; many craft brewers get along without one, either



Baudelot cooler and coolship at De Dolle Brouwers

with workarounds or alternative systems that work better for their own systems.

The primary drawbacks of a CLT are twofold: up-front costs and the space needed on the brewery floor. Broadly, the latter downside is increasingly painful as the cost of real estate climbs. And while the purchase price for tanks isn't excessive, it can be tempting for breweries-in-planning to save money by streamlining their systems and forgoing the CLT.

One workable alternative is to repurpose another vessel in the cellar as the CLT during brewing—that's how Broyard handled their brew days before they added a CLT. Nishikawa says it worked, but it was a logistical challenge that slowed down production—if they didn't have an extra empty tank, they couldn't brew. Any delays in the cellar would reverberate through the production schedule.

At Ambitious Ales in Long Beach, California, the team brews a mix of hazy IPAs and lagers on a CLT-less system.

"We finally got a real brewhouse in February 2024," says cofounder Garrett Carroll. Before that, the brewery was a scrappy setup cobbled together from dairy tanks; using that ad-hoc system, they built a loyal

neighborhood following. They're currently brewing about 1,500 barrels a year and selling more than 90 of it out of the taproom.

For fermentation, they're mostly pitching Fermentis SafLager W-34/70 dry yeast, which Carroll says has always handled warm pitching just fine. He says that knockouts take about 35 to 40 minutes on average and that an oversized heat exchanger gets wort temperatures below 80°F (27°C).

"We pitch at whatever temp we can knock out with city water," Carroll says. "We're pitching healthy yeast, and we haven't seen anything weird." This strategy works even better for breweries with access to cold well water or with a municipal supply that's similarly chilled. The colder the water supply, the quicker the knockout.

Even among equipment suppliers, there are skeptics of CLTs. Among them is Marc Gottfried, manager of brewery design and sales at Crawford Brewing Equipment, based in Rock Island, Illinois.

"Most brewers don't need a CLT," he says, arguing that their ubiquity in breweries is traditional but unnecessary. "The only instance where you must have a CLT is if you are brewing with RO water." His favored alternative, a **two-stage heat**

exchanger, "saves thousands of dollars and lots of square footage," he says.

By using a two-stage heat exchanger, you can first use municipal water to cool the wort—even if that water comes into the building at 80°F (27°C)—before a glycol line feeds the exchanger's second stage. The two-stage units are slightly larger, somewhat more complex, and initially more expensive, but they can save cost and space compared to a big CLT.

The same two-stage principle can work with two single-stage heat exchangers operating in series. The first unit uses the water supply to get the wort mostly cooled—and to fill the HLT—while the second unit can be smaller, hooked into the glycol loop to handle the final drop in temperature without overly stressing the glycol chiller. It adds complexity, but the availability of used equipment could make adding a second HX an attractive alternative.

Be Gentle, and Chill


Still, CLTs have their advocates—even in smaller breweries. Among them is Carl Clements, owner of Bubba's Barrels in Knoxville, Tennessee, and a builder of smaller-scale brewing systems.

"The CLT is underutilized in a small brewery," he says—but he notes that it doesn't have to be a jacketed stainless tank setup connected to the cellar's glycol loop. "Anything you have is better than nothing."

For example, you can use a brite tank or a plastic tote hooked up to a small auxiliary glycol chiller, or even "a stainless trash can in your cold room." After all, small-scale craft brewers are known for their scrappy approach and innovative spirit, and the CLT is not what makes or breaks a beer—it just makes the process more efficient.

"Brewing is super resource-intensive," says Tonewood's Facchinei, "and there's no way around that fact."

As a brewery grows, there are more opportunities to become more efficient. Sometimes, it can be a big step that leads to a big impact—but it's often easier and more realistic to tackle myriad small tweaks to process and equipment, with each adjustment moving the needle another little bit.

While CLTs may be unsexy—another stainless tank in a facility that's full of them is nothing special—there is something elementally appealing about their usefulness. The idea that water is chilled slowly and cheaply so that it can absorb all the heat added to the wort in the kettle, storing that energy for the next brew, where the cycle starts again—that is satisfying to anyone who's process-minded. It's not the only way to knock out a batch, but it's a simple and elegant one. 

STYLE SCHOOL

Authentically American Wheat

Based more on an ingredient than an existing tradition, American wheat is arguably the United States' first truly native modern beer style. Refreshing and easygoing, attractive and flavorful, it arrived just in time to help American craft beer grow. **By Jeff Alworth**

IN THE SUMMER OF 1985, matters had become dire at the second-oldest microbrewery in Portland, Oregon.

The Widmer brothers had founded their brewery on the bet that what the city's drinkers wanted was a hoppy altbier. Elder brother Kurt had spent time apprenticing at Uerige in Düsseldorf, to learn how to make it, and he and brother Rob refined that beer—and only that beer—back home. Five months after they opened the doors of their small, makeshift brewery, however, they were discovering that... it may not have been such a hot bet.

Widmer Brothers was weeks from bankruptcy, and Rob and Kurt were brewing just twice a month. Nobody wanted a bitter, brown ale of a type they'd never heard of. To save the brewery, the brothers needed to switch gears, so they turned to one of Kurt's old homebrew recipes—a wheat ale he called "Weizenbier."

The Widmers weren't the only ones making wheat ales. Anchor made the first modern example a couple of years earlier, and Pyramid made one the same

year. But those beers didn't land like the Widmers' did. Their unfiltered wheat beer would become the first bona fide hit of the craft era in the Pacific Northwest—within five years, nearly every brewery in Oregon and Washington was making one. And it wasn't only there: A few years later, a wave of breweries making wheat beers in the Midwest would also make it one of the most popular styles in that region.

Though they've enjoyed an enduring popularity, American wheat ales are far removed from the 2026 zeitgeist. They're mild in flavor—a familiar if wispy kind of beer that slakes summer thirst without provoking a lot of deep contemplation. They can be wonderful little beers—they're just not showy. Yet there's a good case to be made that wheat ales were the first truly American beer style made in the craft era—American pale ales, after all, were riffing on a British tradition.

Starting with wheat as an ingredient rather than a tradition, breweries intuitively found their way to a similar kind of beer whether they were making it in Kalama or Kalamazoo. Drinkers also found it intuitive: It was familiar enough to pass for beer but different enough to seem daring—a perfect envoy for the early craft era. (The slice of lemon or orange that often appeared atop the glass didn't hurt the style's mainstream appeal, either.)

We don't give American wheats a lot of respect today, but perhaps we should. They were one of the few styles Americans brewed that weren't based



on imitation, and they represented an authentically new kind of beer. More importantly, the style wasn't an evolutionary dead end like many of the beers of the era; American wheat is still very much a piece of the current tradition.

The Hazy German-American Connection

Americans have been making wheat beers for more than a century, but in the 1800s most examples cast back to the beers of Bavaria and, especially, Berlin.

This makes sense: The first great brewing boom in the United States arrived with the wave of German immigrants from the 1840s on. When we think of German wheat beers today, our minds turn to Bavaria—but in the 19th century, Berlin's tart weissbier was ascendant. Brewing journals

from the 19th century document these beers, which were a small but consistent portion of the country's output. As the new century approached, they began to lose their connection to Berlin and evolved into lighter, lager-like ales lightened with corn grits. They didn't inspire great affection, either: "Undoubtedly, the American article could be improved upon," wrote the chemists Wahl and Henius in 1902. The beers appear to have faded from the scene even before Prohibition.

By the 1980s, Bavarian weissbier had recovered in popularity in Germany, and was well known to Americans who had a connection to Germany. Anyone familiar with cloudy Bavarian wheat beer must have been confused by the new American examples, which may have looked the part but lacked the characteristic yeast-driven flavors of banana and clove. It

didn't help that many breweries followed the Widmers' lead and called these beers by the German name, "hefeweizen."

I've always wondered whether the Widmer brothers would choose a different name if they had a chance to do

it all over again, but it's academic now. In choosing Hefeweizen for their flagship, they explicitly evoked Bavaria's wheat beers. The unfortunate result was that discerning drinkers dismissed American "hefeweizens" for what they lacked rather than appreciating what they contained.

Speaking to Eric Asimov of *The New York Times* in 2006, an indignant Garrett Oliver expressed the common view. The Widmers, he said, were "trading on the good name of an actual, established style to sell something different."

It was a charge that haunted the brewery for years. But what if the critics had looked closer? They might have seen that behind the maladroit name, there was a pretty cool beer waiting to be enjoyed.

Think of Them as Wheaty Pale Ales

Despite the name and Kurt's knowledge of German brewing, what's striking about the original recipe for Widmer Hefeweizen is how American it is. Widmer Brothers made the beer with 45 percent wheat, filling it out with American two-row and 5 percent crystal. That was how many American brewers built their recipes then: neutral two-row plus some specialty malts added for color and flavor. That caramel malt is a little wink from an earlier age.

The hop schedule is especially American. The beer used U.S.-grown

Tettnang and Cascade, with two bittering additions, but then one late addition just before flame-out and, amazingly, a whirlpool addition—or "hop jack," as they called it at the time. The brothers intended for the beer to be low in bitterness—the target listed on the recipe was 12 to 18 IBUs—but it ended up twice as bitter, settling in at 30 IBUs. Kurt used a pretty classic German step mash—that's what he'd learned in Germany—and they ultimately simplified it.

In the end, the beer had almost nothing in common with German weissbier. It had a lightly wheaty palate, no clove or banana, and a noticeable citrus kiss from Oregon hops. It was basically a wheaty pale ale.

Writing in 1994, Michael Jackson praised Widmer Brothers Hefeweizen, saying it "tastes somewhere between a beer and a fresh, sweetish grapefruit juice, but deserves points for that curious distinction." Anyone reading that today would recognize it as a pretty good generic description for a pale ale in the C-hop era.



American Terroir, American Process

Most people wouldn't immediately associate the Pacific Northwest with wheat, even though all three states in the region are top-10 producers. Instead, they probably think of the Midwest, with its vast, golden fields undulating under the summer sun.

No surprise, then, that a separate and surprisingly similar tradition of wheat brewing emerged there in the early 1990s. And while the Northwest has mostly replaced its tradition of wheat beer with hoppy ales and crisp lagers, the style remains popular in the Heartland.

One of the more famous wheat ales first appeared in 1992, when Michigan's Bell's—then officially still known as Kalamazoo Brewing—released its Solsun wheat ale to celebrate baseball spring training. Bell's Oberon later became an unlikely buzz beer across the Midwest, its popularity bubbling up years after the original launch. Capitalizing on that popularity, the brewery created Oberon Day, releasing a new vintage every year around the spring equinox. Originally inspired by Belgian saison, Oberon is a slightly stronger wheat ale (5.8 percent ABV), but it otherwise features the classic contours of the style. It gets Bell's house ale yeast and 26 IBUs of citrus-forward hopping.

Other important Midwestern wheat beers include Boulevard Unfiltered Wheat; the Kansas City brewery released it in 1990, beating Kalamazoo's by a couple of years. Goose Island's 312 Wheat, meanwhile, didn't appear until 2004. Appearing that same year was another popular regional standard, Three Floyds Gumballhead—a hopped-up take out of Munster, Indiana, fusing wheat beer with pale ale. Dry hopped and these days listed at 38 IBUs, Gumballhead predated hazy pale ale—often made with plenty of wheat—by several years. Today, Three Floyds markets it as an “American wheat pale ale.”


Writing in his 2010 book *Brewing with Wheat*, Stan Hieronymus elicits Gumballhead's initial inspiration from founder Nick Floyd: “Most American wheat beer is boring,” he tells Stan. Floyd brewed Gumballhead to show that “American wheat beer doesn't suck,” adding more American hops to enliven it.

American Classics

These Style School columns usually trace a story of evolution and include modern interpretations currently shining in the marketplace. Yet one of the more notable features of American wheats is how little they've changed.

Unlike most styles, they're not really process beers. They're made simply to drink simply, starting with a grist of 40 to 50 percent wheat—malted, but sometimes with a portion of unmalted—hopping that's usually subtle, and a clean-fermenting ale yeast. Some shimmer with light haze, while others are as cloudy as a double dry-hopped hazy. They haven't evolved much because they haven't needed to.

For decades, American wheat ales suffered because people judged them for what they weren't. Several years back, I was judging the finals of a category of traditional American styles at the Oregon Beer Awards. As we began to discuss the beers, one judge put a sample forward and said, “Can we just agree this is the best beer on the table?”

He talked about how well made it was, how precisely brewed and yet so approachable and delicious. We didn't know who brewed it at the time, but we knew one thing: It was an American wheat, and stripped of all those preconceptions, it was a serious banger. We gave it the gold. 

MAKE IT

Formula Wetland Wheat

From Formula Brewing in Issaquah, Washington, here's a recipe for the contemporary American wheat beer that won gold at the 2025 Great American Beer Festival. Head brewer Jesse Brown says the idea is to combine a heavily wheat-forward ale with clear, fruity-floral American hop presence and a dry, snappy finish, presenting clear in the glass. “When enjoyed fresh, it's akin to a bright pale ale, but softer, less bitter,” he says. It's also “a bridge of sorts between old and newer hop-varietal flavors.”

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)
Brewhouse efficiency: 72%
OG: 1.048 (11.8°P)
FG: 1.005 (1.4°P)
IBUs: 25
ABV: 5.5%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

6 lb (2.7 kg) Rahr Brewer's Standard 2-Row
2.7 lb (1.2 kg) Rahr White Wheat
4 oz (113 g) Weyermann Acidulated
8 oz (227 g) rice hulls

HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

0.09 oz (2.5 g) Simcoe Cryo at first wort [8 IBUs]
0.09 oz (2.5 g) Simcoe Cryo at 30 minutes [6 IBUs]
1 tablet Whirlfloc at 15 minutes
1 oz (28 g) Citra at whirlpool [11 IBUs]
1.4 oz (40 g) each Cascade and HBC 638 at dry hop

YEAST

Omega OYL-004 West Coast Ale I

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains and mash at 147.5°F (64°C) for 45 minutes. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off—slowly—into the kettle. Sparge at 160–165°F (71–74°C), topping up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort, depending on your evaporation rate. Boil for 60 minutes,

adding the hops and finings according to the schedule. After the boil, do a whirlpool step: Stir or recirculate to create a vortex, cooling the wort to 195°F (91°C); add the whirlpool hops, spin 15 minutes, then allow 15 more minutes to steep and settle. Chill to about 66°F (19°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 68°F (20°C) for 4 days, then raise to 70°F (21°C). After 2 more days, add the dry hops. (If possible, drop/remove hop trub each day thereafter.) After 4 more days, crash. Keep cold 2 days, then package and carbonate to 2.9 volumes of CO₂.

BREWER'S NOTES

Water: Issaquah and the greater Seattle area have incredibly soft, neutral water. This beer was designed to lean into that and not make too many salt adjustments.
Mash and lauter: Adjust the amount of rice hulls accordingly, depending on your system. I want this beer dry, so I mash thin—3.5 liters per kilo of malt, or about 1.7 quarts per pound. And I lauter *very* slowly, over 2 hours, for extra wheaty character.
Yeast: For this beer I pitch Omega OYL-430 West Coast Ale I+, a diacetyl-reduced version of OYL-004, but it's available only as a commercial-scale pitch.
pH: I'm aiming for a post-boil pH of 5.1, with 4.4 in the finished beer.

STYLE SCHOOL

The Smoke Bomb of the Baltics

This little-known brewing tradition out of eastern Latvia is still alive today, and it's one that fans of smoked beer may want to add to their bucket lists. **By Lars Marius Garshol**

LATGALE, THE EASTERNMOST PART of Latvia, is mostly gently rolling hills, forests, and lakes, but it also has a good sprinkling of farmland. Latvian farmhouse ale may not have received much attention, but here—right up against the Russian border—the farmers still make a powerfully smoked farmhouse ale using local yeast.

Latgale is somewhat different from the rest of Latvia. It had an earlier stint as part of Russia in the 16th century, and the people here speak a variant of Latvian that the rest of Latvia sometimes has a hard time understanding. Latgale also has a larger Russian population than the rest of Latvia—including a group known as the Old Believers, who broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church to escape religious persecution in Russia centuries ago. Today, the Russians in Latgale mainly make moonshine, while the farmhouse brewing is very clearly Latvian.

The Black Sauna

The area is known for its old traditions, one of which is the *melnā pirts*, or black sauna. Farmers used to retreat to these black saunas to cleanse themselves with hot baths; in Latvia, this developed into a ritual that could involve several cycles of heating and cooling, “whipping” with birch branches (really a form of massage), and much else. For the Latvians, sauna bathing was about purity, and it had religious overtones.

The Latgalian version is a two-story building in which the ground floor is the bathing sauna, with benches for people to sit. What heats it is the classic Nordic-Baltic sauna oven—just a pile of stones with room underneath for a fire and no chimney. That's how it got its name: Smoke fills the room while the fire burns, and the walls turn pitch-black.

Like several other pockets around Europe, Latgale is smoked-beer country. The farmers brewed with their own barley, which they dried in the sauna after germinating and steeping. Their saunas included a small hatch in the ceiling, which they would open when drying the malt; that hatch allowed the smoke and heat to waft upward into the drying box (*āznīca*) on the floor above.

PHOTO: MATT GRAVES/WWW.MATTGRAVESPHOTO.COM



MAKE IT

Latgalian-Style Smoked Farmhouse Ale

This recipe represents most of what we know about the traditional farmhouse style of Latgale in southeastern Latvia. Note that the bitterness and strength of these beers can vary widely—feel free to adjust the hops or pack more malt into your mash tun.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)
Brewhouse efficiency: 72%
OG: 1.058 (14.3°P)
FG: 1.007 (1.8°P)
IBUs: 35
ABV: 6.7%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

11.7 lb (5.3 kg) alder-smoked malt

HOPS SCHEDULE

4 oz (113 g) whole-leaf Saaz in hop tea [35 IBUs]

YEAST

Escarpment Kolnasāta, or your favorite kveik or Lithuanian farmhouse strain

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains. (Optionally, for an authentic touch, throw some rye straw into your mash tun to serve as a filter bed.) Mash in at 149°F (65°C), rest about 45 minutes, then raise to 156°F (69°C) and rest another 1–2 hours. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the fermentor. Once the wort has cooled to about 93°F (34°C), add the hop tea and pitch the yeast. Ferment 3 days, then rack or package—no need to carbonate. After 4 more days, open and enjoy.

BREWERS' NOTES

Malt: Alderwood-smoked malt isn't often available commercially. Indiana's Sugar Creek sometimes sells a Stjørdal-style malt that

they dry in alder smoke—about as traditional as you can get, short of making it on your own farm. A few other craft maltings, such as Maine's Blue Ox and the newly reopened Skagit Valley in Washington state, have occasionally produced pale malts smoked with alder after kilning. Notably, not all Latgalian farmhouse brewers insist on alder—so there may be room to try another type.

Stone Beer: Some brewers in southern Latgale still use hot stones to heat their mash. For more about that method, see “Fire & Brew-Stone,” beerandbrewing.com. **Hops:** The ale is raw, but the hops are not. To brew a hop tea, simply boil the hops in some water for 1 hour and add the tea to the wort before fermentation. The IBUs here assume you're adding all the tea, but you can also add to taste.

Yeast: A few years ago, Escarpment made the strain from Mājas Alus Kolnasāta available as part of its Kveik Ring series. Commercial breweries can still request it with advance notice, but it's unclear when or if they'll make it available to homebrewers again. Assuming you can't source a Latvian farmhouse culture, a multi-strain kveik or Lithuanian farmhouse culture could be the next-best choice.

That box is similar to a sáinn, or Gotland-style kiln: an empty box with a drying surface for the malt. Today, the surface is usually metal mesh or metal sheeting with holes. Just like in Stjørdal in Norway, the farmers here used alderwood for drying—its characteristic aroma is intense—although the Latgalians seem less insistent than people in Stjørdal that *only* alder be used.

Brewing Latgalian Ale

The brewing follows the classic raw-ale process: an infusion mash followed by lautering and cooling the wort, then pitching the yeast. However, unusually for a Baltic farmhouse tradition, quite a few Latgalian brewers apparently just let the hops soak in the mash instead of boiling a hop tea.

In the southern part of Latgale, it was traditional to brew stone beer—and that tradition is still alive, so the beer there remains slightly different. (See “Fire & Brew-Stone,” beerandbrewing.com.) In other parts of the south, the brewers appear to have abandoned the smoky flavor, instead brewing something closer to the Lithuanian kaimiškas.

In most of the region, the traditional yeast culture appears to be lost. However, at least two brewers in the northern part, around Rēzekne, still have farmhouse yeast. Those cultures, as it turns out, also belong to the family of farmhouse yeast that includes kveik and Lithuanian farmhouse cultures. According to lab analysis, these Latgalian yeasts are mostly nonphenolic—but given how smoky the beer is, that may not matter much, from a flavor standpoint.

As with other farmhouse cultures, the Latgalians would pitch their yeast at around body temperature, and they mostly still do. Like kveik and similar cultures, the Latgalian yeast also ferments quickly. We visited one brewer whose wort-cooling was taking longer than usual, so he ended up pitching the yeast in the late evening, after we'd left. When we came back the next day at noon, the fermentation didn't have much further to go.

Dark, Smoky Majesty

These Latgalian ales are massive smoke bombs dominated by that strong alder-smoke aroma—though perhaps not as intensely smoky as stjørdalsøl.

The reason for that is probably the greater distance from the fire to the drying surface, so the smoke passing through the malt is cooler and more dispersed. I've heard that some brewers use green, undried alderwood to make the smoke aroma stronger, so the intensity probably varies with the brewer's personal preference.

The beer's strength appears to be all over the place, with brewers using as little as 200 grams of malt per liter of beer to four times as much. For a five-gallon batch, that's 3.8 to 15.2 kilos, or 8.4 to 33.5 pounds of malt. Assuming homebrew efficiencies, that could mean a gravity range of 1.042 to 1.166 (10.5 to 37.4°P), fermenting to ABVs that could range from 4 to 15 percent ABV. How much hops they use varies just as widely.

As for how it tastes, I've only been able to taste a single version—but, on the plus side, I enjoyed a couple of liters of it over the course of a week.

Dainis Rakstiņš lives in the village of Berzpiļs. His farm is on top of a hill, which is why it's called *Kolnasāta*—“farmstead on a hill.” He uses a yeast culture he got from another villager more than 20 years ago, and he malts his own barley in his sauna. Even the hops grow locally, so Rakstiņš is that rarest of brewers today—a complete farmhouse brewer who doesn't need to buy anything to make his beer.

And what a beer it is: a dark and majestic smoke bomb with an aroma dominated by alder smoke, but also with notes of

Can You Read Latvian?

Besides my visit to Latgale, much of the information in this article comes from archive documents that describe the farmhouse brewing through interviews done by the Latvian authorities in the 1930s. However, I haven't managed to get them all translated. If you read Latvian and want to help by translating documents, please send me an email at larsga@garshol.priv.no. —Lars Marius Garshol

fruit and minerals poking through. Once you take a sip, the second shock hits you: Yes, the beer is smoky, but it's also *very* bitter. The deep, caramel-forward smoky flavor billows around you as a sharp, lasting bitterness pounds your taste buds... then, toward the end, a delicate blackberry fruitiness shines through as the crowning touch.

Rakstiņš says he's aware that his beer is not for everyone—but this is how it is, take it or leave it. It's definitely not a beer for novices.

Next Stop: Latgale

It's certainly possible to drink Latgale's smoked beer today, but you'll need to go there.

Together with his wife Ilona, Dainis Rakstiņš runs a small brewery called *Mājas Alus Kolnasāta*—or House Beer Kolnasāta—and they travel around to local events selling their beer in bottles. You can also buy it directly from the farm. You can even pay a fee to join a brew day there, an experience that I strongly recommend. (You'll want a translator, though, to understand the brewer's explanations.)

At the end of the brew day, there's an extra treat: Dainis and Ilona take the spent grain, still mixed with lots of hops, out to the cows in the field. You wouldn't think bitter, smoky spent grain would appeal to cows, but you'd be wrong. The cows know the drill—when they see the tractor approaching with the grain, they literally come running. The cows and calves immediately stick their heads in the buckets and start gobbling it up; once buckets start emptying, there's some light scuffling over the remaining grain.

If a trip to Latgale sounds far-fetched, you could of course build your own black sauna, malt some barley with alderwood, pick some wild hops, and brew a version of this beer yourself. Escarpment Labs has sold the yeast in the past; it's also available from the British National Collection of Yeast Cultures as NCYC 4542.

So, it's definitely possible to try Latgalian smoked ale. But you have to really want it.



Clockwise from top: Dainis Rakstiņš kilns malt; their yeast culture came from a fellow villager two decades ago; moving wort from the mash vessel to the open fermenter; cows fight over spent grain and hops



Ask the Pros...

Techniques, ingredients, and histories behind some of the world's most compelling beers, as shared by the brewers themselves. **By Ryan Pachmayer**

NYBP Hazy Crush

New York Beer Project, Lockport, New York

YOU WON'T FIND "ISLAND-STYLE"

IPA anywhere in your preferred set of style guidelines. Attach that phrase to a New England IPA, and today's savvy beer geeks probably peg it for exactly what it is: clever marketing for a tropically flavored beer—fun and frivolous. Nothing to take too seriously.

They might take it more seriously, however, if they learn the beer in question has won back-to-back gold medals at the Great American Beer Festival.

Founded in 2015 by Kevin and Kelly Krupski, New York Beer Project now includes three locations in upstate New York plus one in Orlando, altogether producing about 4,000 barrels per year. Both the GABF gold medals went to the Hazy Crush from the Beer Lodge location in Orchard Park, New York, although the others also brew it.

Head brewer John Hyman, who created the recipe, says "island-style" refers to its tropical nature; the NYBP marketing team came up with the beer's name and

nomenclature. It apparently speaks to a wide range of customers.

"Most weeks, it's our No. 1 seller," Hyman says. "It brings a lot of non-IPA drinkers, non-beer drinkers, over to the beer side of things."

Experimental Gold

Those crowd-pleasing tropical-fruit flavors don't come only from the hops. Both GABF medals came in the Experimental IPA category—Hazy Crush gets additions of dried mango, hibiscus, and pineapple.

Hyman says they use dried versions because other fruit formats they've tried were less consistent, sometimes contributing an odd bitterness. They source the dried fruits directly from Nuts.com. "The added mango contributes to and enhances the depth and complexity of Hazy Crush," he says. With the mango's distinctive, natural sweetness, "it just complements the hops well."

Meanwhile, he says, the pineapple adds a brighter, more vibrant note without overpowering other elements of the beer, while the hibiscus brings an aromatic, exotic twist. "It's floral, slightly tangy and tart, adding a ruby-red hue and contributing some natural antioxidants to the beer."

Hyman was a farmer and homebrewer before joining New York Beer Project. In fact, he still farms 200 of his own acres plus 100 acres of leased land, using up his

vacation time at the brewery to plant crops during the busy spring season.

For more than six years at NYBP, Hyman brewed an experimental range of beers called the One Series, honing his techniques and processes along the way. "The series allowed me to experiment and use whatever ingredients I wanted to; there were no limits," he says. "I experimented with everything from yeast strains to hops, grain bills, and oxygen rates during knockouts."

The 43rd beer in that series—called The One, Version 43: Island Edition—proved particularly popular at a local beer festival. Hyman entered it into the 2023 New York State Beer Competition, where it won a bronze medal. A few hop-tweaks later, and Hazy Crush was born; in 2024, it won gold in the same competition.

Citra and Nectarone

The hop schedule has evolved over time to where the earliest addition is now five minutes before the end of boil. (Hyman says they brew several other IPAs that don't see any hot-side hops.)

A big step in maximizing the flavor and freshness of Hazy Crush and NYBP's other hop-forward beers has been getting to hand-select lots of American and New Zealand varieties. "It's a game changer," Hyman says. He loves the distinctively

fruit-forward nature of Citra, looking specifically for mango, orange, and pineapple notes from their chosen lots. “Sometimes there are two lots that you go back and forth on,” he says, “and if it’s that close, I walk away from the table to clear my senses before coming back to pick the one that’s going to work.”

From New Zealand, Nectarone is the other variety that stars in Hazy Crush. “It has some intense tropical flavors and aromas,” he says. “I target passion fruit and peach, but the lot I selected this year also had some interesting strawberry notes, adding to the complexity of the beer.”

While Citra and Nectarone take the lead in Hazy Crush—along with the fruit—Hyman also selects lots of Mosaic, Simcoe, Nelson Sauvin, and Superdelic for NYBP’s other hop-forward beers. He says he designs his recipes around using full bags of hops, helping maximize freshness—no need to reseal anything and put it back in the freezer.

He says they’ve also moved toward doing one big dry-hop addition, near the end of primary fermentation, minimizing the opening of the tank. “The beer usually drops another 0.2 to 0.3°P after that dry hop, hopefully scrubbing out any oxygen that was introduced to the tank.”

Other Key Details

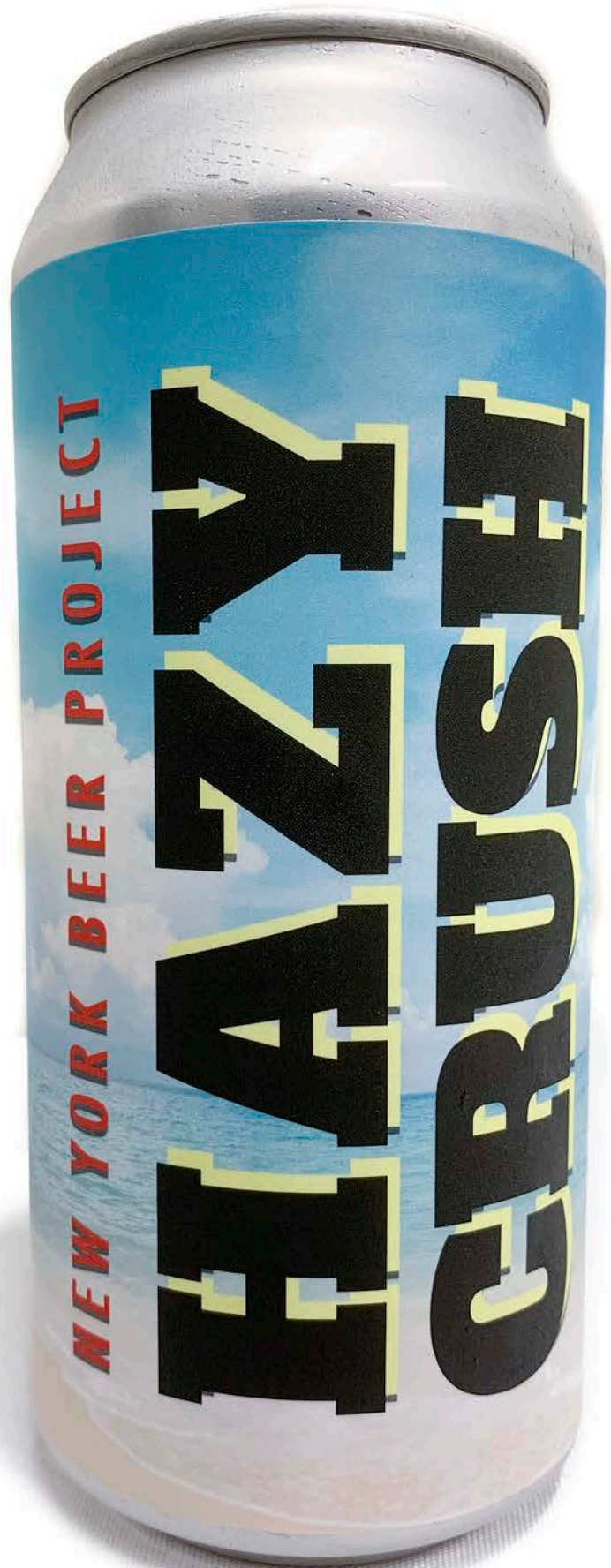
After the hefty whirlpool hop load, Hyman says they put a heavy emphasis on removing trub from the beer before pitching the yeast.

After knockout, they’ll spin the whirlpool, allow a short rest, then drop the temperature down to 180°F (82°C) before spinning again, adding the whirlpool hops for 25 minutes, then allowing another 15 minutes to steep and settle. “I’m trying to keep as much of the hops as possible in the kettle,” Hyman says.

He’ll even hold off on pitching the yeast for a few hours, so that he can dump more trub from the cone of the fermentor. He says that also helps the viability of the next generation of yeast—they’ll repitch a handful of times, depending on the production schedule.

His preferred strain for Hazy Crush is Omega Cosmic Punch, but he says it’s not because of the yeast’s genetically boosted thiols. “Cosmic Punch is just super-clean,” Hyman says. “I’ve always found London III to have a chalky finish.”

For the water profile, he says he’s settled into a straightforward 2:1 chloride-to-sulfate ratio for Hazy Crush. He’s gone as high as 5:1, he says, but he keeps coming back to the 2:1 ratio for his hazy IPAs.




He's also settled on Rahr and Briess for his two-row base malts. The NYBP brewpubs don't have silos full of base malt—they use too many grains for that to make sense—but he says he enjoys the consistency of those two brands.

(Back in his homebrewing days, Hyman says, he would brew with barley that he grew himself. But it had higher protein and too much “terroir,” he says, so he sold it to local distilleries. These days, the farm is primarily focused on hay, corn, soybeans, and wheat.)

All told, Hazy Crush takes about five weeks to make, from brew day to pouring. About five days after the dry hop, Hyman starts dropping the temperature by 5°F (–3°C) per day, dumping hops every other day. He hits the beer with a centrifuge just before it leaves the tanks—he wants to get all of the yeast out of it.

“I feel like at five weeks, this beer really hits its stride,” he says. “I can definitely tell when an IPA has been put out in three weeks.”

Maybe some of that patience learned in the fields also succeeds in the brewhouse. Or, maybe this is just a beer that runs on island time. 



MAKE IT

NYBP Hazy Crush

NYBP head brewer John Hyman shares this homebrew-scale recipe for the experimental beer that blossomed into a winner of back-to-back gold medals at the Great American Beer Festival. Besides hops selected for their bright, fruit-forward flavors, this New England IPA also gets a cold-side addition of dried fruit and hibiscus flowers.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 72%

OG: 1.072 (17.4°P)

FG: 1.018 (4.5°P)

IBUs: 39

ABV: 7.1%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

11.8 lb (5.4 kg) U.S. two-row

1.5 lb (680 g) flaked oats

5 oz (142 g) Briess Carapils

HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

1.6 oz (45 g) Citra at 5 minutes [11 IBUs]

3.2 oz (91 g) each Citra and Nectaron at whirlpool [28 IBUs]

3.2 oz (91 g) each Citra and Nectaron at dry hop

1.5 oz (43 g) dried mango at secondary

1 oz (28 g) dried pineapple at secondary

0.3 oz (9 g) hibiscus flowers at secondary

YEAST

Omega Cosmic Punch

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains and mash at 154°F (68°C) for 60 minutes. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, about 30 minutes, then run off into the kettle. Sparge with 168°F (76°C) water and top up as needed to get about 7 gallons (26.5 liters) of wort. Boil for 60 minutes, adding hops according to the schedule. After the boil, do a whirlpool step: Stir or recirculate to create a vortex, cooling the wort to 170°F (77°C); add the whirlpool hops, spin for 25 minutes, then allow 15 more minutes to steep and settle. Chill to 67°F (19°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 69°F (21°C). Toward the end of primary, on Day 5 or 6, add the dry hops. After 3 more days, drop/remove the hops, and continue to drop again every other day. Around Day 14, test for VDK (see “Hunting for Diacetyl,” beerandbrewing.com); if clear, begin dropping the temperature by 5°F (–3°C) per day. When the beer has dropped to 32°F (0°C), add the fruit and flowers; taste after 24 hours, and continue to steep until the flavor is where you like it. Condition cold for 2–3 weeks, then package and carbonate to 2.5 volumes of CO₂.

BREWER'S NOTES

Water profile: We target 70 ppm chlorides to 35 ppm sulfites.

FG & O₂: Focus on the final gravity—around 4.5°P (1.018) is the sweet spot for this beer. We use oxygenation to adjust attenuation: For a 30-barrel batch, this beer gets a full dose for the first 15-barrel turn but only a half-dose of oxygen for the second turn, the next day. If it gets a full dose both days, the beer eventually ferments down toward 3°P (1.012) and gets too dry. On the other hand, 5°P (1.020) is too sweet and cloying. Mileage on your system will vary.





Daria Bandura and Bogdan Tochka

Mova Pilsner

Mova Brewing, Dnipro, Ukraine

“IF YOU WANT TO MAKE A PILSNER, you need a decoction,” says Bogdan Tochka. “Decoction is very important to get the Czech-style taste. With decoction, you have a full body, but without caramel colors and taste. Not all people can taste this, but it is important that we perform a decoction.”

Tochka is cofounder of Mova Brewing in Dnipro, Ukraine, and he is uncompromising about the company’s Czech-style pilsner. That dogged approach is clearly working: Mova Pilsner won the gold medal in the Bohemian-Style Pale Lager category at the 2025 European Beer Star competition, beating out Czech, German, American, and other top lager brewers from around the world.

The win is an illustration of how brewers in war-torn Ukraine are working as hard as ever. Dnipro is roughly 60 miles from the front lines. Previously a contract-brewed brand, Mova opened its own modern brewery in Dnipro in 2021. Russia invaded Ukraine the following year, and Russian drone attacks and missile strikes on the city have been regular occurrences ever since.

Mova, meanwhile, continues to brew while embracing a mission to foster connections within its community. Among other activities: The brewery hosts an annual two-week festival of music, food, and beer; it supports brewing courses at the local university; it published a book on brewing history in the region; and it supports a local brewing museum. Through various collaborations, Mova also has helped raised funds to support Ukrainian troops on the front lines.

Mova brewmaster Daria Bandura studied in Odesa, earning her bachelor’s





and master's degrees in fermentation engineering. While the medal is no doubt a source of pride, Bandura says the brewery doesn't enter competitions for the marketing boost.

"We don't build our company around the awards," she says. Instead, the brewery uses competitions to get professional feedback on its beers. "This helps us understand how to make our beer even tastier."

Mova Pilsner's win at the European Beer Star, incidentally, marked the first time the brewery had submitted the beer to an international competition.

Czech Inspiration

Mova started in 2017 when Tochka and two friends wanted to open a brewery—Tochka says he had the time but not the money, while his partners had the money but not the time. So, he traveled around Ukraine and brewed on different equipment, figuring out what he wanted in Mova's own system.

"After three years of contract brewing, we built our brewery," he says. Mova's lineup of beers is modern and diverse, including amber ale, witbier, oatmeal and vanilla stouts, and IPA. The Pilsner, however, is

traditional through and through, and the four-vessel brewhouse has no problem handling Mova Pilsner's single decoction.

Czech-style pale lager is what Tochka wanted to brew from the start. "Czech pilsner is more complex and full-bodied," he says. The team toured Czechia to visit breweries and develop their own process and recipe.

"We visited not only the big historic breweries, but also little village breweries," Tochka says. "When the Czech people are brewing beer, they are not putting too much of an emphasis on it. It is just easy thinking because the father brews beer, the grandpa brews beer. In the Czech Republic, this is normal."

One thing they learned is that oxygen isn't the same kind of enemy to Czech pale lager that it is for other beers. "We usually fight against oxygen," Tochka says, "but in Czech pilsner, a little bit of oxygen is nice."

Originally, Mova used an open fermenter that was dedicated solely to the Pilsner. When the kräusen would start to slow down, the team would transfer the beer to a conical tank. However, the Pilsner that won European Beer Star gold fermented

Mova Pilsner won the gold medal in the Bohemian-Style Pale Lager category at the 2025 European Beer Star competition. ... The win is an illustration of how brewers in war-torn Ukraine are working as hard as ever. Dnipro is roughly 60 miles from the front lines.

in conicals rather than open tanks—the brewery has recently moved away from open fermentation to more easily meet strong demand for the beer.

“Our open fermentors can only make 120 hectoliters per month, but the people need 200 to 300 hectoliters per month,” he says. The role of oxygen was more pronounced in the open-fermented lager. “It made the beer a little darker and gave it some caramel notes,” Tochka says. When the brewery moved away from open fermentation, they slightly increased the amount of Munich malt in the beer to compensate for that loss of richness.

Exactng Standards

While Mova Pilsner gets some Ukrainian-grown Magnum hops for bittering, the flavor additions are strictly Czech Saaz.

“Magnum is responsible for a soft, delicate bitterness,” Bandura says. The Ukrainian hops come from the Zhytomyr Oblast, west of Kyiv.

Ukrainian hops are becoming more accessible, Tochka says, despite the country’s largest breweries buying up most of the supply; he estimates that craft beer is only about 2 percent of the market.

Still, Tochka says he doesn’t envision a time when they might replace Saaz with a Ukrainian variety. “If you make pilsner without Saaz, it’s not pilsner,” he says. “I can see in the future a great beer with all Ukrainian hops, but it is not pilsner, it’s Ukrainian beer.”

To select their Saaz, the brewery works with its Czech supplier to get samples of hop lots sent to Dnipro to evaluate. “We buy a five-kilogram pack from the supplier, and we boil water with a cup of hops,” Tochka says. “If the end result is nice, we will buy a larger quantity.”

The beer’s grist is currently 88 percent pilsner malt and 12 percent Munich. “With one-step decoction and a little bit of Munich, it adds complexity,” Tochka says. “With two or three decoctions, you can use only pilsner malts.”

Mova sources both those malts from within Ukraine—Tochka says it’s important to support the country’s economy. Supply disruptions have become common during the war, so Tochka says they use more than one Ukrainian supplier to ensure they’ll have enough malt.

They ferment the Pilsner with Fermentis Saflager S-189, initially at 55°F (13°C) for about a week. Once the gravity has dropped to 5.3–5.7°P (1.021–1.022), they raise the temperature for a diacetyl rest. The team then lagers the beer for three weeks.

The Hovering War

Mova has redundant sources of power, necessary because of occasional power outages as Russia continues to target Ukraine’s infrastructure.

“When the Russians attacked our electrical system, we had blackouts,” Tochka says. “We bought a solid-fuel steam generator, so when we don’t have electricity, we use that and a diesel generator to continue.”

The war’s looming presence is something that people in Dnipro feel daily. Some people have left, Tochka says, while others who lived closer to the front lines have moved into the city.

“Our brains are a bit crazy but have adapted to the constant air raids,” he says. Last year, a Russian missile destroyed a neighboring business.

“Every person feels it. Everyone understands that this could be our last day. We understand that we cannot stop.”

MAKE IT

Mova Pilsner

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 72%

OG: 1.053 (13.1°P)

FG: 1.014 (3.5°P)

IBUs: 27

ABV: 5.3%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

8.7 lb (3.9 kg) Ukrainian pilsner

1.2 lb (544 g) Ukrainian Munich

HOPS SCHEDULE

0.5 oz (14 g) Ukrainian Magnum [19 IBUs]

0.6 oz (17 g) Czech Saaz at 30 minutes [5.5 IBUs]

0.6 oz (17 g) Czech Saaz at 10 minutes [2.5 IBUs]

YEAST

Fermentis Saflager S-189

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains, mash in at 126°F (52°C), and rest 10 minutes. Raise to 147°F (64°C) and rest 20 minutes. Prepare for a decoction: Transfer about two-thirds of the mash to the lauter tun and hold there at 147°F (64°C). Meanwhile, with the remaining third, raise to 162°F (72°C) and rest 15 minutes; then raise to a boil and boil for 20 minutes. Reunite the mash in the lauter tun and mash out. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle. Sparge and top up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort. Boil for 90 minutes, adding hops according to the schedule. After the boil, chill to 55°F (13°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 55°F (13°C) for about 7 days, until the gravity has dropped to 5.3–5.7°P (1.021–1.022), then raise the temperature to 59°F (15°C) for a few more days for a diacetyl rest. Begin dropping the temperature by about 4°F (2°C) per day, then lager at 34°F (1°C) for 3 weeks. Package, carbonate, and enjoy.



Make Your Best...

Get to the heart of every beer style, as **Josh Weikert** shares tips and philosophies for brewing the very best.

American Light Lager

IT WASN'T SO MANY years ago that you'd ask a proud craft or homebrewer about light lager and the response would be, "Why?" Maybe we've all matured (maybe), but that doesn't seem to be the question anymore. Even if you're the type who doesn't enjoy an ice-cold, faintly flavored lager on a hot day, there is the technical challenge to appreciate. These are mistake-free beers—you can't even afford to have dirty thoughts while making one. So, keep it clean, sanitize thoroughly, and make sure your temperature control is tight. Then the question becomes, "How?"

Style: At an ABV this low, it takes special attention to make a beer with some flavor that still disappears on the palate. There's less alcohol and less bittering, and they're incredibly pale—we're talking the very bottom of the SRM scale. We're going for delicate but not flavorless—we don't want to pull back so far that we're approaching hard-seltzer territory. Besides careful process and clean fermentation, malts still matter here.


Ingredients: Some light-lager recipes call for nothing but two-row and adjunct, but we can slightly broaden the flavor and mitigate risk by mixing our base malts: equal parts two-row and pilsner. That gives us hints of honey, corn, grain, and not much else. To further lighten the body, we'll add flaked rice (or rice syrup) at about 15 percent of fermentables—I find that it also adds a slight "snappy" character to the finished beer. We're aiming for a starting gravity around 1.038 (9.5°P), which should keep us below 4 percent ABV.

For hops, we want about 10 IBUs of any low-alpha hop at the top of the boil. Going for the lowest alpha we can find—I have some Hallertauer Mittelfrüh with about 2.5 percent alpha acids—helps to dial in that fine bitterness while adding more beery flavor via plant material. The effect is much more pleasant than a pinch of Magnum.

For yeast, I go with Chico. "But that's not a lager yeast!" Yeah, I know. But if you do everything else right, neither your friends nor beer judges will know the difference. I've brewed this with a variety of "clean" yeasts—ale, lager, and hybrid—and I'm sincerely convinced that they all work more or less the same. Besides, Chico imparts some trace fermentation flavors that can add just a *touch* of additional character, even within these tight parameters. However, if you prefer to pitch 34/70 or other lager strain, go for it. Just be sure to adjust your fermentation temperatures and times accordingly.

Process: Unless your water is already soft, I suggest adding a bit of calcium chloride. It will help round out your malt flavors, so they don't come across as overly "grainy." Mash for attenuation—a step mash isn't a bad idea here, or you can try a lower single infusion (say, 148°F/64°C). Having said that, I get good results with a longer mash at 152°F (67°C). The rice will still help keep things light and dry.

With the Chico, you can ferment at 60°F (16°C) for about a week then raise to an ambient 68°F (20°C) or so to finish. You want to ensure complete fermentation with no by-products. Once it's crashed, give it plenty of CO₂ to boost that impression of crispness.

Still skeptical? Brew it and see, comparing it with your own favorite (or least favorite) light lager. I think you'll find that you really like it—and that you have a new source of pride. 



MAKE IT

Just Lite American Lager

Besides sanitation, success here depends on two things: slightly chloride-forward water to round out the malt, and great attenuation for a light, dry finish. American light lager can be forgettable, but it doesn't have to be—this one should be refreshing, lightly grainy, and highly drinkable.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 72%

OG: 1.038 (9.5°P)

FG: 1.009 (2.3°P)

IBUs: 9

ABV: 3.7%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

3.1 lb (1.4 kg) pilsner

3.1 lb (1.4 kg) two-row

1.1 lb (500 g) flaked rice

HOPS SCHEDULE

1 oz (28 g) Hallertauer Mittelfrüh at 60 minutes [9 IBUs]

YEAST

White Labs WLP001 California Ale or other Chico strain

DIRECTIONS

Mill the base malts and mix with the flaked rice. Mash at 152°F (67°C) for 90 minutes. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle. Sparge and top up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort. Boil for 60 minutes, adding hops according to the schedule. After the boil, chill to about 59°F (15°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 60°F (16°C) for 7 days, allow a rise to about 68°F (20°C), and hold there an additional 14 days. Crash to 35°F (2°C), then package and carbonate to about 2.5 volumes of CO₂.

Honey Ale

YEARS AGO, I MADE a concerted effort to spend more time brewing with alternative sugar sources. The resulting beers—brewed with honey, molasses, black treacle, golden syrup, and more—had dimensions and accents that often surprised me, expanding my brewing horizons. This ESB with honey became a steady favorite, and it's relatively easy to nail on the first or second attempt.


Style: If you need an excuse to brew this, Alternative Sugar Beer is a BJCP category—a place for the “harmonious marriage of sugar and beer,” where the base style is recognizable but gets a noticeable flavor addition from your chosen adjunct sugar. To succeed with this, you want a flavorful sugar that leaves some character in the beer *after* fermentation—a sweet, unfermented sugar character won't work. Yet if there's nothing left of the sugar's flavor, you're better off entering the beer in the base style's category. Incidentally, the same holds true for casual drinkers—if they see “honey beer,” they expect to taste the honey... but they don't want to drink actual honey.

Ingredients: Let's start with the sugar. There are thousands of types of honey that vary in flavor and intensity, and we should follow the lead of our base style and go for something flavorful—an ESB has enough malt character that a lighter-flavored honey would get lost in the mix. After tasting different types at a local honey vendor, I settled on buckwheat honey. It has a great beer-friendly flavor profile—spicy and earthy, with a complementary mineral character that works well with an English pale ale. I find that 10 percent of the fermentables is a good starting point. We also don't want to add so much (say, 50 percent) that it becomes a braggot. From my base ESB recipe, I'm just cutting back the Maris Otter to sub in the honey, keeping the crystal malts the same.

Because this honey has a spicy note that accentuates bitterness—and because sugar dries out the beer, with less malt to cushion that bitterness—I'm also dialing back the bittering hops. On the other hand, I'm adding more at flameout to maintain that nice English-hop aroma to balance the evident honey character.

For yeast, we have a polarizing choice: the Ringwood strain. It's an infamous diacetyl producer, but we can manage that—see below. What we want are those undeniably English fruity esters and that malt-forward profile. We also want its relatively low attenuation—we don't want to risk thinning out the beer too much.

Process: If you have softish water, consider a small gypsum addition to flint up the flavor and accentuate the style. I add my honey while running off into the kettle, allowing the hot wort to dissolve it. (Don't worry, you'll still taste the honey—but if your honey's aroma is more delicate, you can add it at flameout or whirlpool.) We start fermentation relatively cool (62°F/17°C) before an increase to ambient temperature to encourage diacetyl cleanup—this yeast can get buttery without a patient, thorough rest.

The finished beer should be easily recognizable as an English pale ale (or your own base style of choice), while the honey (or other sugar) adds pleasant background flavors that complement and enhance your other ingredients. Of course, you can also use flavorful sugars to modify your existing recipes. No need to substitute—you can try adding pounds of interesting sugars to contribute more flavor and ABV. These recipes tend to be easy to create—just take care to consider attenuation with your yeast and the flavor compatibility with your malt and hops. Keep it simple and have fun with it. 



MAKE IT

Buckwheat Honey Bitter

This honey ESB makes for a fun ride on the palate: Between the ample crystal malts, the honey flavors—buckwheat is rich and spicy—and yeast, you end up with a lot of candy, strawberry, earthy, spicy, and malty flavors. The key ingredient, though, is the honey: It ties the whole experience together.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 72%

OG: 1.060 (14.7°P)

FG: 1.014 (3.6°P)

IBUs: 34

ABV: 6.1%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

8 lb (3.6 kg) Maris Otter

1 lb (454 g) British crystal 45°L

8 oz (227 g) British crystal 15°L

8 oz (227 g) British crystal 90°L

HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

1 lb (454 g) buckwheat honey at first wort

0.75 oz (21 g) Nugget at 60 minutes [33 IBUs]

1 oz (28 g) Fuggles at whirlpool [1 IBU]

YEAST

Wyeast 1187 Ringwood Ale

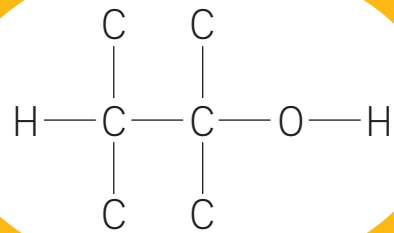
DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains and mash at 152°F (67°C) for 60 minutes. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle, adding the honey as you do. Sparge and top up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort. Boil for 60 minutes, adding hops according to the schedule. After the boil, do a whirlpool step: Stir or recirculate to create a vortex, cooling the wort to about 170°F (77°C); add the whirlpool hops and allow 15 minutes to steep. After the boil, chill to about 62°F (17°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 62°F (17°C) for 7 days, then allow a free-rise to room temperature (68–70°F/20–21°C) for another 7–10 days. Crash, package, and carbonate to about 2 volumes of CO₂.

BREWER'S NOTES

Whirlpool: One way to quickly cool your wort for a whirlpool addition is to add a calculated amount of cold water, collecting less volume (sparging less) to account for it.

Cask ale: If you have the gear, this ale is a perfect candidate for cask-conditioning.



FLAVOR FEVER

Speaking Beer's Chemical Language

If it's helpful to develop a common vocabulary to describe what we sense in our beer, it's even more helpful to understand the chemistry underlying those aromas and flavors. Here's a primer. **By Randy Mosher**

BEER IS A HIGH ART that can reach into peoples' souls, but its physical reality is purely chemical.

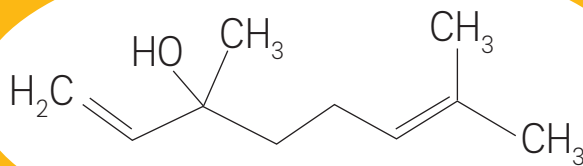
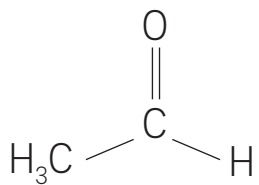
Few of us think about it that way. It's usually easier and more useful to talk about beer at a conceptual level, using various strategies such as semantic structures and categorization schemes. Our main organizing tool is the language of *beer styles*, which we've based on historical patterns even as they reflect current practice and marketing language. Wine people have something similar they call *prototypes*—idealized exemplars of grapes or blends from particular locations. These are less fluid and more limited than beer styles.

At perception's most primal level, we all rely on personal memory associations triggered by the chemicals that make up odors. Accumulated throughout

our lifetimes, these are useful for helping to recall an identity—but to communicate effectively with others, we must translate them into a commonly understood language. For experts, that generally means using industry-specific vocabulary.

For beer's positive aroma qualities, we usually describe them with the same culinary language we would use to describe a dish of food. There's nothing wrong with that, but it does rely on a shared understanding of terms and references that vary by culture. For more problematic odors, meanwhile, we're more likely to call out their chemical names.

So far, so good. Conceptual frameworks and general vocabulary are great until you want to get under the hood to fix a problem or tinker with the mechanics of



a particular beer. If you don't understand the chemistry, solutions are either guesswork or based in tried-and-true experience. Chemistry tells us the source of certain qualities, what leads to the loss of flavors, and ultimately how to manage the complex processes of brewing and fermentation to achieve the desired results.

To me, it's just good diligence to try to learn everything there is to know about our favorite beverage. It's undeniable that our bodies are responding to chemical reality before our brains make meaning of it. Chemistry behaves predictably—it's often quite complicated, but it doesn't have to be scary.

Having recently embarked on an effort to dig into beer's chemistry, I've found that this has proven to be another useful tool in my tasting kit. We all struggle to name odors; chemistry offers another way in. Is it fruity? Must be esters. Citrusy? Terpenes. Something cheesy or goat-like? Organic acids.

It isn't exactly a flavor wheel, but chemical families mostly mirror beer's main odor categories. You can even learn to think of them as aroma "primaries."

About Aroma Chemistry

Almost any organic chemical with the right volatility can be smelled—and there is an uncountably large number of them. We have the ability to smell them all, including ones that might be invented in the future. Our sense of smell is just about unlimited.

Every molecule has certain physicochemical properties. There are thousands of these, some of which are pretty hard to understand. However, we can narrow these properties down to just a few that are most important.

First are the chemical families, typified by so-called functional groups somewhere in their structure—these make them esters, aldehydes, fatty acids, and more. Each family has a range of possible characters, although sometimes there are outliers.

Second is molecular length (or weight), based on the number of carbon backbone

atoms. Chemists often abbreviate these carbon lengths as C4, C6, and so on. Aroma qualities vary by length in mostly predictable ways. When would-be flavorists are learning their molecules, they receive homework that consists of a handful of one family at certain lengths. So, that is the basic structure of their categorization.

There are other meaningful properties. For example: Whether a molecule is water-soluble or not obviously affects how it behaves in a beverage, and it even provides clues to its pleasantness: Water-insoluble ones are generally most pleasant. We're quite sensitive to water-soluble molecules containing sulfur, chlorine, or nitrogen; many of these are quite unpleasant.

Some Chemical Families and Their Qualities, Oversimplified

Hydrocarbons are the most basic types of organic chemicals, composed only of carbon and hydrogen. Except for terpenes, they play no significant role in beer aroma.

Fatty (organic) acids are a broad family of chemicals produced by plants and microbes. They are typically perceptible in beers as off-flavors—acetic acid (vinegar) and various "goaty" odors (caproic, aka hexanoic acid, etcetera). They are essential in all fermented and distilled beverages as precursors for the formation of esters: The mix of organic acids going in largely determines the estery aromas coming out. **Alcohols** contain an OH group tagged onto the carbon structure. It's pretty obvious that fermentation creates alcohols, a self-defense strategy by yeast to kill competing bacteria. Alcohols are minor players in beer aroma, ranging from harsh and alcoholic to floral and fruity. However, the esters created when alcohols combine with fatty acids are central to fermentation aroma.

Aldehydes are a rather shape-shifting group, generally green and grassy when the molecules are short, getting kind of "soapy" at about C10—think cilantro or cumin—but they can also have orangey/

citrus qualities. Created by oxidation of fatty acids, (E)-2-nonenal (usually abbreviated as T2N) adds a famously cardboard-like quality to stale lager. On a more positive note, some aldehydes created by Maillard reactions during kilning contribute malty and caramel notes.

Terpenes proper are hydrocarbons. They are volatile and poorly soluble in beer, so they mostly dissipate in brewing, although dry hopping can contribute some.

Terpenoids is a broader term that includes similarly structured chemicals having different functional groups, making them alcohols or other types. This transformation often occurs during fermentation. Terpenes are not generally produced by fermentation; in beer, they come almost exclusively from hops, which contain hundreds of different terpenoids. Their aroma character ranges from evergreen to floral to citrusy and others. It is believed that terpenoids, like esters, act in pools, making them hard to pick out individually. (See "Diving into Beer's Aroma Pools," beerandbrewing.com.)

Esters form when an alcohol and a fatty acid combine, lending beer much of its fermentation character. There are two main types to know: **acetate esters** and **branched-chain esters**. The first group forms in fermentation when ethanol enters the mix—these are generally bright and fruity. Some, like isoamyl (banana) and ethyl hexanoate (apples, anise), can sometimes be perceived individually, but research on wines has shown that ester aromas generally meld together into a "fruity" pool regardless which esters are present. Ethyl acetate is always most abundant, but it has a generically vinous aroma character that's hard to pick out unless it rises to a high enough concentration to trigger a "solventy" trigeminal sensation. Branched-chain esters form as beer ages, lending spiritous-vinous characters.

Ketones, or rather **diketones**, are best known in beer as buttery diacetyl (2,3-butanedi-one), a by-product of yeast usually present because of incomplete conditioning.

Lactones are ring-shaped variations of esters. They're rare in beer, but they may show themselves as coconut aromas in oak-aged beer, wines, and spirits.

Volatile phenols are ring-shaped molecules that can easily join together into polymers. Sometimes of immense size, these are important to texture in wine. Volatile phenols are small enough to smell; in beer, they're mostly associated with the strains of yeast used in Bavarian weissbier and many

We all struggle to name odors; chemistry offers another way in. Is it fruity? Must be esters. Citrusy? Terpenes. Something cheesy or goat-like? Organic acids.

Belgian ales. Volatile phenols can also come from the breakdown of wood, giving oak-aged beers their characteristic vanilla and sometimes cinnamon notes.


Heterocyclic Maillard compounds are ring-shaped molecules containing oxygen, nitrogen, and/or sulfur. The chemistry is immensely complex, but they're responsible for the full range of nutty, toasty, and roasty aromas produced in all but the palest malts by kilning and roasting.

Sulfur is an element that forms many different types of chemicals to which we are extraordinarily sensitive. It finds its way into beer via sulfur-containing amino acids such as cysteine; yeast and bacteria may then metabolize it into compounds such as sulfides and sulfites. The best known of these is DMS (dimethyl sulfide), which has a kind of creamed-corn aroma, but other sulfides can be more cabbage-like. Sulfite is basically sulfur dioxide, smelling sharply of burnt match. Other sulfur molecules can take many configurations, but as a group they're known as **thiols**. Even in minute quantities, these can be important players in beer aroma. A small molecule called ethanethiol can add garbage/sewer odors because of bacterial contamination. Some thiols are important in grapefruit, passion fruit, and other pleasantly fruity aromas derived from modern hop varieties. They're also important potentiators of other fruity aromas in beer. (See "The Complex Case of Thiols," beerandbrewing.com.)

Amines are nitrogen-containing chemicals that don't occur in beer. Good thing, because they are odors of death and decomposition—think smelly fish.

Chlorine/bromine compounds are among the most potent ones we know, smellable sometimes at or below one part per trillion. They have musty or medicinal qualities, and they're always due to contamination in beer, either from mold or incompletely rinsed bar-glass sanitizer.

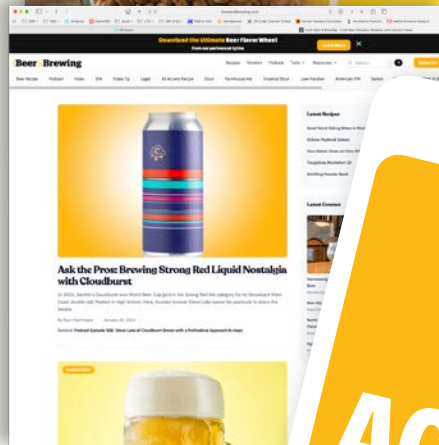
I'm leaving out many other chemical groups because they play little or no role in beer aroma—even as problems. Whatever their identity, odorous chemicals are the creations of specific metabolic pathways in plants and microbes. Knowing these is another way brewers can control their end products. The rabbit hole goes deep, but it's something to explore as a brewer.

My suggestion: Keep these in mind as you taste some beers—narrowing odors down to their families is a helpful step in identifying them. You may even end up appreciating your beer in a whole new language. 



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FROM GRAIN TO CLASS

Ale, Encased in Amber

American amber ales aren't fossils— they're more like liquid signals sent through time and space from an earlier generation. And today's brewers continue to refine and polish them to an appealing ruby hue, while the opportunities for flavor and quality are greater than ever.

By Joe Stange

There's something stunning about a properly reddish-amber beer, shining like a bright jewel on the bar amid the golds, browns, and blacks.

The name gives it away: Amber is about color before it's about style—in fact, its stylistic influences have been myriad. It's a colorful liquid meant to fill a gap, to turn bipolar options into a spectrum. It's meant to look enticing in someone else's hands—now *you* want one, too—and to be a visible example of beer's diversity. It's what turns a flight of tasters into a rainbow.

Yet it's not just about looks. Between the absence and presence of dark roast lies a thick swatch book of options—a kaleidoscope of malts through which today's commercial brewers, busy making ever-paler IPAs and ever-inkier stouts, rarely get to peer. And, thanks to meaningful differences in how they're malted, the flavors of these malts vary more than their colors; they can range from the lightest drizzle of heavenly honey on toast through all the Dante-esque levels of caramel depth to devilish dark fruits, and more. Even as breweries seek ways to appeal to wider audiences, these flavors tend to be far more food-friendly and approachable than hop bombs and pastry stouts.

That color also says nothing about hops or yeast choices, allowing the brewer a free hand to pull from existing influences or attempt something new. You can go herbal and spicy or juicy and ester-driven, bitter and dry or round and fulsome, clean and understated or big and fruit-punchy. It might taste like Düsseldorf, it might taste like London, it might taste like the West Coast... or it might taste like 1985.

What does an American amber ale taste like? You can guess, but you don't know until you take a sip. Within that color lie nearly limitless options—many more options than the pioneering brewers had 40 years ago, when American red and amber ales began to ascend.

Their Influences Are Legion

The narrative of these ales runs from the earliest days of microbrewing through the brewpub boom of the 1990s—and by then, it was practically obligatory for every small brewery to make one.

"I think the simple reason is, it's drinkable as fuck, and it doesn't look like yellow beer," says John Mallett, the longtime head of operations at Michigan's Bell's Brewery, now retired. "And at the time, that was important—people drink with their eyes. They're going to a pub, they want to have something different, and they can see it's different."

Mallett paints a picture of drinking craft beer in the '90s: "You go to a standard brewpub, they've got a burger, they've got wings. They've got a stout that's *black*—oh my god!—and they've got an amber, they've got a pale ale, and then they've got some kind of very light wheat beer. ... That was the menu at so many of these pubs at the time—it was formulaic, not well executed. 'But boy, look at this range of beers that we have! Four of them, all different colors!'"

Yet for American drinkers—and brewers, too—those were still the early days of learning what beer could do. "People were on a

tasting journey," Mallett says. "I'm sure you did the same. I did the same. ... You really kind of moved around, and the amber certainly looked different, tasted different, *was* different than everything else."

A decade earlier, options were even fewer. For the microbrewing pioneers of the 1980s, the whole point was to brew, drink, and sell something that tasted—and looked—different than industrial pale lager. It was about flavor, but color came with it. Again and again, inspiration from Britain and Europe merged with American ingredients, especially Cascade hops and clean-fermenting American ale yeast. But it wasn't for the sake of innovation—it was just what they knew, and what they could get.

At first, British ales were the strongest influence on the burgeoning American ale scene. Amber-colored ESBs peppered the lineups of the early microbreweries, including Colorado's Boulder Brewing in 1979. And many pale ales still lived in a very reddish place.

When Larry Bell launched Kalamazoo Brewing out of his homebrew shop in 1985, he debuted with Great Lakes Amber Ale. Later, as Bell's Amber, it would become an archetype of the American style and fuel the brewery's growth well into the '90s.

But why an "amber"?

"I don't think anybody would've known what an ESB was," Bell says. "A lot of my inspiration, a lot of my homebrewing, came from British brewing books. I don't know if they call them anything 'amber' in there, but that just seemed to be the term in the day."

"I don't think anybody would've known what an ESB was. A lot of my inspiration, a lot of my homebrewing, came from British brewing books. I don't know if they call them anything 'amber' in there, but that just seemed to be the term in the day."



Bell also had studied with Bill Newman, who founded Newman's Brewery in Albany, New York, in 1980. Among other British-inspired ales, Newman brewed an Albany Amber Ale. Growlers had yet to gain currency, so Newman sold his ales in bag-in-a-box polyurethane cubitainers—as did Bell, in his early days.

Full Sail came a few years later—opening in 1987 in Hood River, Oregon—but its Full Sail Amber Ale was influential throughout the 1990s and beyond. Jeff Alworth, in *The Beer Bible*, quotes Full Sail brewmaster James Emmerson as saying that English ESB was the source material for American amber; he refers to Full Sail Amber as an “American ESB.” They didn't label it as such, either, but the color is easy for anyone to grasp.

Yet England wasn't the only influence on American ambers and reds—far from it. A much-overlooked influence on the American ales of that time doesn't hail from Derby or Dorset or even Dublin—it hails from Düsseldorf.

In 1984, the Widmer Brothers didn't launch with Hefeweizen—they launched with an Alt. Now owned by AB Inbev via the Craft Brew Alliance, Widmer no longer brews Alt regularly—but the brand's Drop Top Amber Ale is a core beer.

When Alaskan Brewing opened in 1986, altbier was the inspiration behind what would become the brewery's hugely successful Alaskan Amber. Besides being a big seller, the beer enjoyed a nearly annual subscription to gold medals from the Great American Beer Festival until the mid-'90s.

Its category tells part of the story. After the earliest GABF competitions were straight-up people's choice awards—Sierra Nevada Pale Ale won the first in 1983—the judging of broad style categories began in 1987. That first year, there was a category for Ales—but there was no specific category for *amber* ales, nor was there any specific category for ESBs.

There was, however, a category for Alts. Alaskan won gold that first year, in 1987, and again in three of the next four years. Then, in 1994 and 1995, Alaskan Amber jumped categories and instead won golds in American Amber Ale.

For any brewer looking for perspective on the style, Mallett recommends a trip to the Rhine Valley. “Altbier in Düsseldorf,” he says. “I mean, goddamn—you can drink a lot of beer in Düsseldorf. It's so delicious. That's amber ale! Drinking those beers from the source should make somebody rethink, ‘why I don't like amber.’ Great malt character.”

Nor were London and Düsseldorf the only source material for the early American ambers. Odell conceived its flagship 90 Shilling in the Scottish style, and well before that was Grant's Scottish Ale at Yakima Brewing. (Bert Grant himself was Scottish-born.) Famously, it was Belgian pale ale that inspired Fat Tire Amber—which, in a sign of the times, is no longer amber at all.

As these American ambers evolved, brewers gradually and more confidently embraced a homegrown kind of flavor—namely, hops. Anderson Valley Boont Amber Ale, for example, started with English varieties but moved more American, at times getting whole-leaf Cascade, Columbus, or Mt. Hood via hopback. (“Amber ales are epic,” that beer's webpage says today. “They are the bedrock of what we now know as craft beer. ...”)

More to the point: American brewers—whether by necessity or personal taste—always added their own thumbprints. Ironically, now that amber and red ales are out of fashion, the options for ingredients and sources of inspiration are far more numerous. And the processes, training, and equipment to ensure quality—especially at the smaller scale—are far better than they were 40 years ago.

PHOTO: COURTESY FAR FIELD

MAKE IT

Far Field Infrared

From Far Field Beer in Lawndale, California, in L.A.'s South Bay area, here's a recipe for the American-style amber ale that won gold at the 2024 World Beer Cup. The brewery describes it as generously malted, with a slight caramel backbone, prominent stone-fruit character, and touches of citrus and pine.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 72%

OG: 1.062 (15.3°P)

FG: 1.011 (2.8°P)

IBUs: 48

ABV: 6.8%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

10.4 lb (4.7 kg) two-row

10 oz (283 g) Weyermann Caramunich I

8 oz (227 g) Simpsons DRC

5 oz (142 g) Simpsons Crystal Light

1.25 oz (35 g) Simpsons Chocolate Malt

HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

0.3 oz (9 g) CTZ at 60 minutes [15 IBUs]

0.6 oz (17 g) Simcoe at 10 minutes [9 IBUs]

0.5 oz (14 g) NZ Cascade at 10 minutes [3 IBUs]

0.4 oz (11 g) CTZ at 10 minutes [7 IBUs]

1 tablet Whirlfloc at 10 minutes

1 oz (28 g) each Citra and NZ Cascade at whirlpool [14 IBUs]

1.1 oz (31 g) Simcoe at dry hop

0.8 oz (23 g) Citra at dry hop

0.7 oz (20 g) CTZ at dry hop

YEAST

Chico strain, such as Fermentis SafAle US-05, or other clean American ale strain

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains and mash at 152°F (67°C) for 60 minutes.

Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle. Sparge and top up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort, depending on your evaporation rate. Boil for 90 minutes, adding hops and findings according to the schedule. After the boil, do a whirlpool step: Stir or recirculate to create a vortex, add the whirlpool hops, spin 10 more minutes, then allow 20 minutes to steep and settle. Chill to about 67°F (19°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 67°F (19°C) until fermentation begins to slow—at about 1.019 (4.8°P)—then raise to 72°F (22°C) for diacetyl rest for 4 days. Drop/remove the trub (or rack to secondary), then add the dry hops. After 4 more days, crash and add keg finings (such as Biofine). Once the beer is clear, package and carbonate to about 2.6 volumes of CO₂.

BREWER'S NOTES

Our water profile for this beer is 50 ppm calcium, 55 ppm chloride, 65 ppm sulfate, 5 ppm magnesium, and 4 ppm sodium. With the yeast, we target a pitch rate of 1.0 M cells/ml/°P.



The Long Red Tail of American Amber Ale

In Sonoma County, California, Fogbelt Brewing is refreshing and reviving an American classic—Mendocino's Red Tail Ale—and finding a highly receptive audience. **By Joe Stange**

The beer often credited as the first American amber ale also came from California's first modern brewpub.

Mendocino's Red Tail Ale debuted in 1983. Its name celebrated a hawk—and a locally popular song about that hawk—as much as it did a color. In composition, the beer was a descendant of the Mendocino founders' own homebrews as well as the legendary New Albion Ale.

While at the quasi-legendary New Albion, which he cofounded in 1976, brewer Jack McAuliffe joined Anchor owner Fritz Maytag in pushing for a new California law—one that would allow breweries to serve their own beers. It passed in 1983—too late for New Albion, which shut the year before. But the founders of Mendocino Brewing hired McAuliffe, bought his kit, and in a town called Hopland opened the state's first brewpub—and the country's second, after Bert Grant's in Yakima, Washington.

Brewed with Cascade and Cluster hops, the ale's colorfully painted hawk label and distinctively carved tap handles marked it as something local—it had no overt pretensions of being anything other than Northern Californian.

Red Tail and its stronger sibling, Eye of the Hawk, would influence many brewers over the years. Mendocino's ups and downs included selling shares to the public, in 1997, to keep the company going; Indian billionaire Vijay Mallya of United Breweries, looking for a U.S. foothold, scooped up most of them. Mendocino moved to a larger facility in Ukiah, but the brewery eventually closed in 2018.

Yet the local attachment to Red Tail remains strong—and the most recent effort to revive it is gaining real traction. Based in Santa Rosa, California, Fogbelt Brewing licensed the brands and began brewing and canning Red Tail Ale—with brightened-up labels that celebrate the original—in April 2025.

"So far, everybody seems to be really excited about it," says Fogbelt cofounder and brewer Remy Martin. "I think we've stayed pretty true to the branding and the flavor profiles of the beer. We're just going to keep trying to do our best to keep the brand alive and grow it."

Besides working from the original recipe, Martin has talked to former Mendocino brewers Don Barkley and Michael Lovett about how they brewed Red Tail back in the 1980s. Lovett's son Kevin, now owner and master brewer at Wolf House in Cloverdale, California, also is a friend. "He had a lot of really great input," Martin says. A key piece of advice: "You've got to use lots of Cluster hops." (When Kevin did so for a previous revivalist batch, he told Martin that the smell "took me back to my childhood.")

For all of Red Tail's importance—locally, and to American craft beer more widely—there is a certain division in people's memories of the beer. "About half of the people that I talked to before we started making Red Tail were like, 'Don't change a thing! It's too valuable, it's too important, you can't change anything.' And the other half were like, 'Yeah, but you're going to make it good, though, right?'"

Martin's tricky job has been to do both—to be true to the original recipe and process while using

today's fresh ingredients and a tight approach to quality. "We're spoiled here, because Red Tail was one of the only craft beers we had available," Martin says. "I would like to think we've done a pretty great job of walking that line and keeping to the original style, but also just keeping it really fresh, and really clean, and really approachable—even for a craft-brew connoisseur or aficionado."

There's no magic to the recipe. "The grain bill is pretty unremarkable," Martin says. Like many microbrews back then, it was just "two-row, a little bit of caramel malt for some color and flavor ... and whatever hops you had access to. So, the actual ingredients aren't necessarily groundbreaking, but I think that we've done a good job of taking new processes and new equipment and making it something that's a little bit more relevant for today's craft-beer market. It's more than just two-row base malt with a little bit of caramel, and it just happens to be local and fresh."

Besides Red Tail, Fogbelt also relaunched Eye of the Hawk—Mendocino's strong ale that was something like a double IPA before anyone used that term. The Fogbelt team is finding that California retailers get it immediately. "Every batch of Eye of the Hawk we've brewed so far has gone out the door," says sales director Jake Croghan. "Usually, you get some pushback from retail accounts. Zero pushback, which has been great."

Now, the brewery is adding tanks—not too common, these



days—and volume-wise Red Tail is surpassing Fogbelt's own core brands, such as Stardust hazy IPA and Del Norte West Coast IPA. Eye of the Hawk has similar potential.

Red Tail Ale, Croghan says, "is the beer that I stole from my dad when I was a kid. I mean, a 15-, 16-year-old, it was my gateway craft beer, right? That and Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. ... You could have said 12 years ago when I got into beer, 'Hey, you're going to sell Red Tail,' I'd be like, 'Yeah right, dude.' But here I am."

Those who want to pay their respects to the historic brand can find it on tap at Fogbelt's taproom in Santa Rosa or its Fogbelt Station beer garden in Healdsburg, built next to a caboose. They can also return to where the beer began—Hopland—to find it at the Stock Farm hotel-restaurant, bang next to Mendocino's original location. Its owner is Gary Breen, the same local entrepreneur who bought the brands with an eye toward reviving them.

Now, the Fogbelt team is receiving emails from people around the United States who are excited about Red Tail's return—sending them photos of the original hawk-shaped tap handles and asking if they can send some of the nostalgia-infused red ale across the country. (They can't—not yet, anyway.)

"I always tell people," Croghan says, "old shit's cool again, man."

Brewing Modern Amber Ales

Consumer preferences have shifted. So have those of IPA-centric brewers, increasingly allergic to caramel malts and their vulnerability to staling.

Yet those malts are arguably integral to American amber ale, and for years they also found great compatibility with classic American citrus-pine hop flavors. But would they work as well with today's more popular modern varieties?

"I also think about the interest in particularly tropical-style hops, both U.S. and international," Mallett says. "Do they play well with the caramel? Not always. And then, if you're making these beers and they're oxidatively unstable, then who wants to drink stale-tasting beer that's sat at the Quickie Mart for three and a half months?"

Yet there are still brewers who enjoy making and drinking these beers—including Steve Luke, founder of Seattle's

Cloudburst. His strong red ale, Peaked in High School, won gold at the 2025 World Beer Cup.

"Something unquestionably *not* cool in the eyes of the general population always makes that something actually cool to a select few," Luke says.

Best of all, for those select few: Today's brewers of amber ales are working with a much better tool set than the previous generation.

“Now, with better crystal malts, better-quality hops, advanced hop products, better access to information—via your mag [and] podcasts—better packaging SOPs, etcetera, it’s fun to brew something ‘old school’ in our modern times. When it works—bright caramel and bread-crusty notes paired with more bright, piney, citrusy hops, followed by an assertive bitterness and a drier finish (like, below 4°P [1.016])—it’s one of the more complex, enjoyable pints you can dig into.”

Over the past few decades, available malts have improved greatly in quality and variety, and skilled brewers can work magic with them. While Cloudburst won for Strong Red Ale last year, the gold medal for American-Style Amber/Red Ale went to Mountain Rambler in Bishop, California—a town of about 3,000 people between the Mojave Desert and the Sierra range.

The brewery’s Singing Coyote is a classically formed example that takes full advantage of today’s thick malt catalog.

“We achieve complexity in malt character because we use a wide range of specialty malts and a blend of base malts,” says head brewer Ryan Quinlan. “The base is a blend of two-row and Maris Otter—this gives a wonderful bready, biscuity, and nutty foundation. And we build on that with a bit of biscuit malt. But the key is likely the variety of crystal malts we use, ranging in color from 15° to 170°L. This allows us to develop a nice caramel complexity and a deep red color. And we get that deep, rich red color without using any off-style dark roasty malts.”

While the beer uses the clean-fermenting Chico strain, it eschews aroma hops for a single bittering addition of about 23 IBUs, so the malt can shine. Quinlan says the brewery chose to brew Singing Coyote out of admiration for the style. “It’s a delve into the toasty, biscuit, melanoidin-rich ... but also pays homage to the beer we came up enjoying, including Boont Amber, Alaskan Amber, and Fat Tire.”

Mountain Rambler has earned a strong reputation for its malt-forward beers. In 2025, its Peaklet Porter also won gold at GABF; the previous year, it won silver at both GABF and the World Beer Cup. And while many breweries today might struggle to sell amber ales, Mountain Rambler is succeeding with two: Singing Coyote and Seven Gables, a Scottish-style ale that’s also won a few medals. Quinlan says both beers have a steady following among the brewpub’s customers.

“Maybe,” he says, “things will cycle a bit back toward malty beer.”

While such beers might sell well at Mountain Rambler, that’s not usually the case at another small brewery in a different part of the state—Far Field Beer, in the L.A. suburb of Lawndale. One exception for them has been Far Field Infrared, an American amber ale that won World Beer Cup gold in 2024.

That beer debuted in 2023, two years after the brewery opened.

“We started just putting it out occasionally, and it always did decently because we don’t do too many darkish beers at our brewery,” says head brewer Bryce Lowrance. “They really don’t sell that great, so we kind of stray away from them. But Infrared is kind of the exception to that, and it always sold decently. But then last year, after the World Beer Cup, I’d say we definitely saw an increased interest in the beer, especially from outside accounts. It’s actually become, over this last year or two, a core beer for us.”

One reason retailers like it: There aren’t too many other red ales these days in Southern California. “I think it’s like a nice little pocket that we kind of slid into,” Lowrance says.

While Mountain Rambler hikes the maltier path, Far Field keeps it coastal with punchy hops. And just as brewers today have more and better malts, the hops might as well come from another planet—or at least another hemisphere.

“It’s heaviest on the Simcoe and Citra,” Lowrance says of Infrared, “and then I’ve also got a healthy amount of CTZ and New Zealand Cascade in there.” He says he used to include Amarillo

MAKE IT

Mountain Rambler Singing Coyote Amber Ale

The recipe for this malt-forward ale—the gold medal-winning American amber at the 2025 World Beer Cup—comes from Mountain Rambler in Bishop, California. “Subtle piney hops and low fruity esters take the back seat to support the complexity of crystal, biscuit, and base malt character,” says operations manager Ryan Quinlan.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)
Brewhouse efficiency: 72%
OG: 1.057 (14°P)
FG: 1.014 (3.6°P)
IBUs: 23
ABV: 5.7%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

3.8 lb (1.7 kg) two-row
3.3 lb (1.5 kg) Maris Otter or Golden Promise
1 lb (454 g) biscuit
9 oz (255 g) crystal 10°L
9 oz (255 g) crystal 40°L
9 oz (255 g) crystal 80°L
9 oz (255 g) crystal 100°L
9 oz (255 g) Munich

HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

0.4 oz (11 g) Apollo at 60 minutes [23 IBUs]
1 tablet Whirlfloc at 10 minutes
Yeast nutrient (including zinc) at 10 minutes

YEAST

Chico strain, such as Fermentis SafAle US-05, Imperial A07 Flagship, White Labs WLP001 California Ale, Wyeast 1056 American Ale, or Berkeley Fresh Chico

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains and mash at 154°F (68°C) for 60 minutes, aiming for a water-mash ratio of 1.5 quarts/pound (~3 liters/kilo). Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle. Sparge (no hotter

than 167°F/75°C) and top up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort, depending on your evaporation rate. Boil for 60 minutes, adding hops, finings, and nutrient according to the schedule. Chill to 68°F (20°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 68°F (20°C) until fermentation is complete and gravity has stabilized. Once the beer has passed a forced diacetyl test (see “Hunting for Diacetyl,” beerandbrewing.com), crash to 32°F (0°C). Optionally, add keg finings (such as Biofine), package, and carbonate to about 2.67 volumes of CO₂.

BREWER’S NOTES

Shop around for your crystal malts and do some ASBC hot steep (see “Kernel Knowledge: Get to Know Your Malts More Intimately,” beerandbrewing.com). Don’t focus only on the malts’ Lovibond (°L) metric—focus on the aroma and the flavor they contribute. And don’t forget: Relax, don’t worry, and have a homebrew.





but finally got fed up with failing to get consistent flavor from it. “I was sick of using that hop and not having it turn out the way I wanted it to turn out.”

So, he switched to Taiheke, aka NZ Cascade, which he’d used in another beer and really enjoyed. “I thought, ‘Hey, this could pair really nicely with these other hops in Infrared.’ ... It’s definitely got this nice little stone-fruit character to it. It’s a little different than American Cascade, which I think leans a little heavier into the citrus. It’s fairly subtle, in my opinion. I think it’s a nice hop to pair with other hops—I don’t know how it would stand on its own, might be a little boring. But it’s just got this nice little fruity stone-fruit thing going on, too, that I think plays really nice.”

Infrared’s malt bill starts with two-row and a bit of Weyermann Caramunich. The crystal malts come from Simpsons—some light crystal and DRC. The DRC (double-roasted crystal) brings deeper toffee as well as malt-driven flavors of dark fruit, such as plum and raisin. “I think it’s a really nice one that I don’t hear about a ton of people using,” Lowrance says. There’s also a pinch of Simpsons chocolate malt in there, just to dial in the reddish color.

The Caramunich is about 5 percent of the grist, the DRC is about 4 percent, and the light crystal is even less. “A little bit goes a long way when it comes to the color and those crystal malts,” Lowrance says. “I don’t like to overdo the crystal malts. It’s not really my thing—I rarely use them. ... So, using the Caramunich I thought would be a nice way to help build or layer some of those flavors without just doing crystal malt—getting a little extra character in there.”

While we chat via video call, Lowrance holds up a glass of Infrared—a lovely, brightly clear reddish-amber with some khaki foam up top. “It’s kind of nice to get one in your hand every once in a while, on a nice sunny day, with the sun shining

through it,” he says. “Get that nice red hue on your table. I don’t know, something about it. I love it.”

Lowrance originally based Infrared on a 10 percent ABV imperial red that he used to brew at home. But he toned down the ABV and malt bill to make something more balanced and drinkable.

“I kind of brewed it to my taste,” he says. “I mean, hops are fantastic, but sometimes you want just a little something else to go along with them. It’s nice to have that little bready-malty-biscuit thing going on.”

A Red Renaissance?

After nearly 22 years of overseeing production of Bell’s Amber Ale and its other beers, Mallett retired from its parent, New Belgium, in 2023.

When he sees my initial text message, asking if he’d like to talk about amber ales, he is “basically as far north in Michigan as you can get,” he says, “tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula, middle of Lake Superior right there. And I went to the bar, and what did they have on tap? Bell’s Amber Ale. ‘I’m having one of *those*.’ And boy, did it taste good—middle of winter, it’s cold as shit out. It’s a rich, malty, beautifully structured beer. Not so mouth-coating and cloying like an imperial stout or anything like that, but just really well balanced.”

Of course, Bell’s Amber isn’t the same beer it was in 1985—but it’s not all that different, either. Current brewmaster Andy Farrell names a few key adjustments: increasing the lower-color two-row while reducing the pale-ale malt, for a crisper body; a greater emphasis on fermentation, “the most important element of this beer”; and a particular change in hops.

“In all honesty, from both a malt and hops standpoint, the beer has not changed much over the years, and I’m going on 26 years at the brewery,” Farrell says. “The beer is made up of two base malts, a low-color base malt and a pale ale malt. From there we layer in one American and one U.K. crystal malt at two different color ranges—both roasted crystals, as we prefer roasted caramel and crystal malt over kilned products—along with Munich malt. Our hopping has evolved some, and today we use 100 percent American hops. Fuggle was a longtime mainstay of this recipe, but we moved on from it a few years back. Overall, we strive for consistency and reliability with this beer.”

While it doesn’t carry the brewery like

it once did, Bell’s Amber is still among Michigan’s top 15 craft six-packs, Farrell says, and it sells especially well in the fall. And while the beer stays true to its origins, modern approaches to ingredients and quality have made it better than ever.

Meanwhile, the more Mallett gets to talking about American amber ales, the more reasons he finds to be enthusiastic. For one thing, they’re not just about the malt: “I mean, you drink a dunkel, and oftentimes those are well structured, they have some hopping component to it,” he says. “But those are not usually American hops, and so you can’t really play in this way that’s got big malt flavor, big hop flavor, big yeast character—like, the whole thing, it just comes together.”

He also brings up the style’s compatibility with food: “It’s just got that great kind of bread-crust, browned reaction,” he says. “I mean, boy, if I was to sit down and eat a hamburger, *that’s* the beer I want to have. Because you’ve got the brownness of the bun, you’ve got the seared meat—god-damn, that’s a great pairing.”

Finally, I ask him about what kind of American amber ale he would develop today, if he were to start one from scratch.

“I want a spectrum of malt flavor,” he says. “I want some residual body and sweetness and sugar, some of that in there. And I do think using a variety of malts is important. Like, the Simpsons T50, what a beautiful malt that is. I mean, Briess makes great malt, too—probably throw some C-20 in there, just to build that kind of malty characteristic. ... But you think about the hop varieties that we have available today—it doesn’t need to be either a Fuggle or a Cascade or whatever else, right? What might I play with? Maybe some Idaho 7? That’d be pretty tasty.”

He says he might also work with the water and fermentation to support a more sparkling, lower-gravity amber ale fit for a warm day.

“This beer is going to be perfect with brats and burgers,” he says. “What would I want? I picture a day, you know, an occasion. It is July, maybe June—not super-hot yet. We’re going to be grilling out. Or maybe it’s September, and I want something that’s got a little bit of sweetness, a little bit of something that it’s really bringing to that burger. And, maybe, I want to drink a bunch of them. So, it doesn’t need to be a 7 percent beer, but maybe it’s a 4.5 percent beer and it’s got real flavor, and we can drink these things all fucking day. ... Yeah, we’re going to call it Ultimate Burger Beer or something.”

He takes a moment, then adds: “It needs a rebrand and some excitement. It’s fucking great beer. People should play with that style, goddamn.”

BREWER'S PERSPECTIVE

Winning with Imperial Stout Today, the Old-School Way

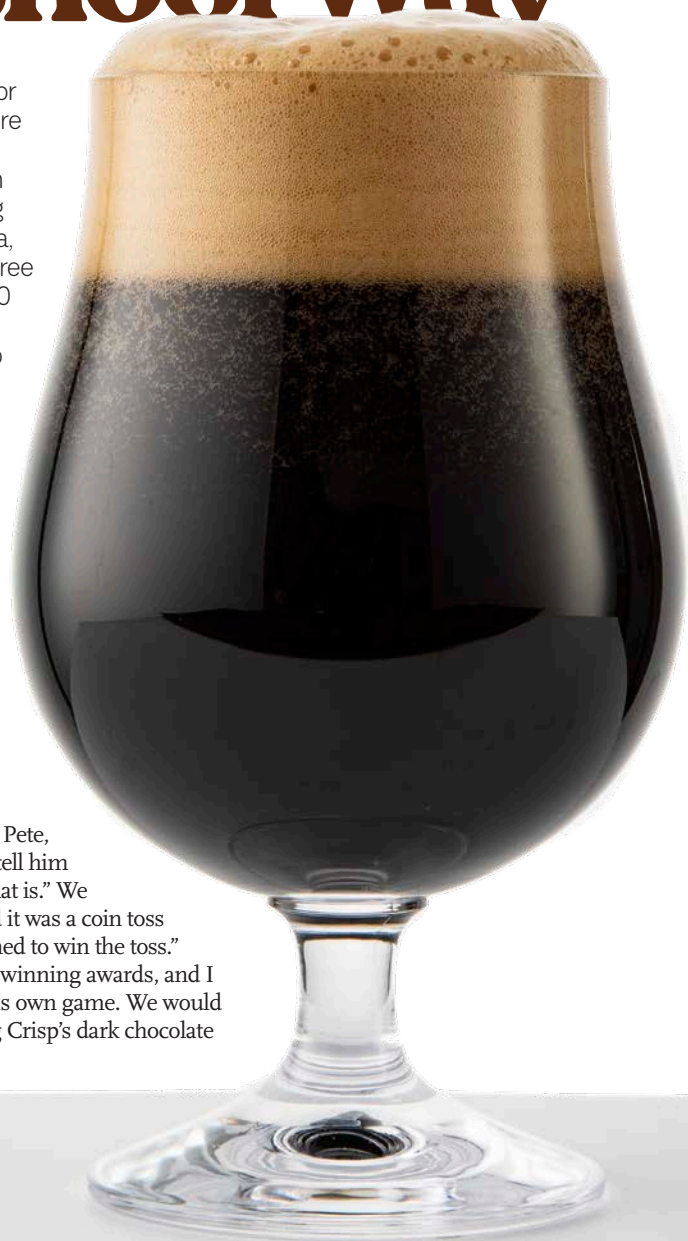
Mike Rybinski has been winning major medals at Midwestern breweries for more than 25 years. Before the Siebel grad was brewmaster at **ZwanzigZ Pizza** in Columbus, Indiana, he oversaw brewing at Walter Payton's Roundhouse in Aurora, Illinois, where he won gold medals at three consecutive World Beer Cups from 2000 to 2004 (plus a silver in the next one). Here, Rybinski describes what goes into **ZwanzigZ Fulcrum**—the American-style imperial stout that won gold at the 2022 and 2025 World Beer Cups.

As told to Ryan Pachmayer

THE MODERN FULCRUM RECIPE has roots that are two decades old, based partly on what I learned from other brewers.

I was secretary of the Illinois Craft Brewers Guild at the same time that Pete Crowley—the former brewmaster at Rock Bottom and cofounder of Haymarket—was the guild's president. In 2004, I won the gold medal for barrel-aged beer at the World Beer Cup, and he won silver. So, we would tease each other—I'd call Rock Bottom and ask for Pete, they'd ask who was calling, and I'd say, "Just tell him it's the gold-medal winner; he'll know who that is." We went back and forth. Pete would say, "I heard it was a coin toss between silver and gold, and you just happened to win the toss."

Pete had his own American stout that was winning awards, and I wanted to see whether I could beat him at his own game. We would blab about ingredients. He insisted on using Crisp's dark chocolate



“You can tell it’s been dry hopped, and part of the secret of this beer is the Chinook. Amarillo gives it a little bit of something more ‘current’ from the C-hops, too, and I always just love Centennial. So, there’s hops in the nose, but you still get the roasted-stout aromas. One time I forgot to dry hop it, and it was night and day.”

malt, saying it was the closest thing to being burnt without being burnt. He would tell me about how he was dry hopping the beer and which hops he was using.

So, I took those ideas, and I took ideas from Joe Formanek of the Urban Knaves of Grain homebrew club. Joe won the Ninkasi Award twice and Midwest Homebrewer of the Year several times—and he won the Sam Adams LongShot competition in 2011, so his Russian imperial stout went into those LongShot six-packs. Joe and I did a pro-am collaboration for GABF one year, and the volunteers pouring it said they had to cut several people off because they were digging it so much.

Joe used Quaker Oats in his stout. At the time, when I was brewing at Payton’s Roundhouse for America’s Brewing Company, we would actually make the oatmeal, get it down to 150–160°F (66–71°C), then dump it into the mash tun.

So, Fulcrum started in 2012 when I came to ZwanzigZ. But I started developing the recipe and using derivatives of it more than 20 years ago.

Fulcrum’s Pivot Points

Everybody is doing imperial stouts at 10 to 12 percent ABV, but I’m getting away with 8 percent. It tastes great, and it’s winning awards.

The base of the beer is two-row from Canada Malting Company. When I was at a previous brewery, before it went bankrupt, CMC was very helpful in maintaining our malt needs, knowing that the bills were going to be paid a bit later.

I’ve stuck with them ever since. I do about 66 percent two-row, and then 4 percent light malt extract (LME) to bump up the gravity.

Besides the chocolate malt and roasted barley, I love Special B. It’s one of my favorites. It’s like a crystal 120°L—it’s so raisiny, it has a ruby color, it’s fantastic. I use that in my nut-brown ale, too.

I’m set up for infusion mashes, so I mash this beer (and all my beers) at 155°F (68°C). Our water is pretty hard and high in calcium—I have to de-lime my hot liquor tank every six weeks because of all the sediment. I just put the water through a charcoal filter to remove the chlorine. Otherwise, I don’t do anything to it—it’s just nice, hard water.

For the hops, I wanted to be a little different—I didn’t want to follow what everybody and their brother does. So, I start with Cascade with 50 minutes to go in the boil, then I hit it again at 40 minutes with Cascade. At 30 minutes, I add Columbus, then at 20 and 10 minutes I add Centennial. On day five of fermentation, when it’s close to the end, I dry hop it with Amarillo, Centennial, and Chinook.

You can tell it’s been dry hopped, and part of the secret of this beer is the Chinook. Amarillo gives it a little bit of something more “current” from the C-hops, too, and I always just love Centennial. So, there’s hops in the nose, but you still get the roasted-stout aromas. One time I forgot to dry hop it, and it was night and day. I still sold through the beer, but it makes a difference.

The amounts of hops changes based on the alphas—I don’t hop select or have a contract, so I use Country Malt Group or markets such as Lupulin Exchange. The IBU target is 34—a tribute to Walter Payton.

I use Wyeast 1056 American Ale liquid yeast, knocking out and fermenting at 68°F (20°C). For this beer, I pitch a corny keg of yeast—it is usually about four gallons (15 liters) of yeast. I take the yeast from a previous beer, which could be the pale ale or the nut brown. I get about 10 uses out of the yeast before I buy another one, but I don’t re-use the yeast from the imperial stout. I also use a little bit more oxygen on this beer. Once the beer has finished fermenting, I bring it up to a 72°F (22°C) for at least 24 hours. Then I crash for at least 48 hours, just straight down to 32°F (0°C) on the glycol—I think the lowest it gets is 35°F (2°C).

After 48 hours, I transfer to the brite tank and carbonate to 13 psi (0.9 bar). I used to have a Zahm & Nagel CO₂ meter, but it broke, so now I do it visually. I take a small glass, open up the sample spigot, and look at the bubbles—that’s all experience. It’s really hard with a helper—I’m trying to teach them, but I’m just looking at the beer, and I can tell just by looking at it. There are so many nuances in the brewhouse.



Once it's carbed in the brite tank, I let it sit for at least 24 hours and suck off some of the bottom—there's always going to be a little yeast left over. I don't use any finings; it's all natural.

Spicy Takes

For our Ghost Pepper Imperial Stout, I take about a quart of Fulcrum and make what I call a "sauce," adding three ghost peppers to it and boiling it up. I separate the solids and pour that liquid into a keg of Fulcrum. It doesn't move fast, but we have some pepper heads down here who are totally geeked for it—and it won gold at GABF in 2017.

When I barrel age the Fulcrum, I like to use Heaven Hill—that's one of my favorites. If the barrel can come in wet, even better. Then I ferment the beer just like normal, but instead of going into the brite, I send some to the barrel. The beer goes in cold, but it sits at room temperature in the barrel and warms up. I put a bubbler on it for a week or two, in case it starts kicking—they occasionally do, they like that little residual sugar that's in the barrel. After two weeks, I cap it off and then go for 100 to 200 days.

In my opinion, 200 days is the best flavor—anything after that, it starts to drop. You have the angel's share—that top of the wooden barrel starts to dry up, and air starts to sneak in there, and it gets to be a little too much oxidation.

So, then I pull it from a barrel, put it into a keg, leave a little bit of headspace, and put it in the cooler for 24 hours to get it cold. Then I shake-carbonate it for 15 minutes at 32 psi, and I typically get the exact carb that I'm looking for. And when you do that, you scrub some oxygen out of it, too.

We call it Fulcrum because that's the pivot point between good flavor and the way the style of the beer is supposed to be—well balanced. The diesel-engine company Cummins' world headquarters is also here, so we kind of went the engineering-geek route.

This beer is big and bold, so you've got to pair it with something like a beefy steak. Pizza-wise—because that's our main dish at ZwanzigZ—we have a lasagna pizza that uses ricotta cheese. That's a fun pairing.

I don't plan to make any changes to this beer. I've hit the board twice with it, so I think I'm going to keep it exactly the way it is. 🍷

MAKE IT

ZwanzigZ Fulcrum Imperial Stout

Mike Rybinski, brewmaster at ZwanzigZ Pizza in Columbus, Indiana, shares this recipe for the American imperial stout that won gold at the 2022 and 2025 World Beer Cups. (Also see his notes below for the ghost-pepper version, which won gold at the 2017 Great American Beer Festival.)

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 69%

OG: 1.084 (20.2°P)

FG: 1.018 (4.6°P)

IBUs: 34

ABV: 8.7%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

11.3 lb (5.1 kg) two-row
1.6 lb (726 g) Castle Special B
1.6 lb (726 g) Crisp Chocolate Malt
13 oz (369 g) Midnight Wheat
13 oz (369 g) roasted barley
13 oz (369 g) Quaker Old Fashioned Oats, cooked

HOPS SCHEDULE

0.4 oz (11 g) Cascade at 50 minutes [5 IBUs]
0.75 oz (21 g) Cascade at 40 minutes [9 IBUs]
0.5 oz (14 g) Columbus at 30 minutes [14 IBUs]
0.25 oz (7 g) Centennial at 20 minutes [4 IBUs]
0.25 oz (7 g) Centennial at 10 minutes [2 IBUs]
0.4 oz (11 g) each Amarillo and Centennial at dry hop
0.2 oz (6 g) Chinook at dry hop

YEAST

Wyeast 1056 American Ale

DIRECTIONS

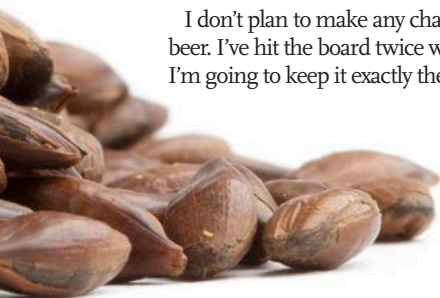
Cook the Quaker Oats for 5 minutes and allow them to cool to about 155°F (68°C). Mill the other grains, add the oats, and mash at 155°F (68°C) for at least 60 minutes. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle. Sparge and top up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort. Boil for 60 minutes, adding hops according to the schedule. After the boil, chill to about 68°F (20°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 68°F (20°C). Toward the end of fermentation (or on Day 5), add the dry hops. After 2 more days, drop/remove the hops and raise to 72°F (22°C) for diacetyl rest. Once fermentation is complete and the beer has passed VDK, crash, package, and carbonate to about 2.8 volumes of CO₂.

BREWER'S NOTES

Water: Our local water in Columbus, Indiana, is high in calcium. The only adjustment I make is to remove the chlorine.

Malt: My recipe has a bit less two-row but includes some light liquid malt extract (LME), representing 4 percent of fermentables, because our mash tun isn't quite big enough. I used to add amber LME instead, but switching to light LME actually improved the beer. It was a big discovery—the amber had too much of a muddled flavor.

Ghost Pepper: For the spicy version, pull about 1 quart (1 liter) of the finished beer from a 5-gallon (19-liter) keg, add 3 ghost peppers, and bring it to a boil. Cool the "sauce," strain out the solids, and return it to the keg.



BREWING INGREDIENTS

Wheat: The Ultimate Multi-tool

A bit of wheat is hard to beat—and it shows up in a bunch of today's most popular beers and styles, even if most drinkers have no idea it's there. Well beyond wheat beers and weizens, the golden grain has become one of the most useful ingredients in the modern craft brewery. **By Josh Weikert**

WHEAT HAS A BRANDING PROBLEM.

For most drinkers—and more than a few brewers—wheat still looks more like a style marker than a useful ingredient. It suggests banana and clove, cloudy appearance, maybe a slice of lemon or orange on the rim. (I always wonder whether the bartender is mad at me for immediately losing it.)

The mind interrogates the word and starts making assumptions, and before you know it, we're thinking about *wheat beer* instead of *wheat*. Once an ingredient gets boxed into a style category, it's easy to stop thinking critically about what it does for beer.

That's ironic because wheat is now embedded in more of today's most popular beers than ever, often in styles that make no mention of its presence. Hazy IPA, West Coast IPA, and pale lager—the three most dominant craft styles right now—all often include some wheat, in some form. It shows up quietly in pale ale, saison, Kölsch, mixed-culture beer, and even stout. There are versions of it used for color (hello,

Midnight Wheat), head formation and retention (flaked wheat), and more.

Most of the time, though, no one talks about wheat unless it's in a “wheat beer.” Even if brewers know it's there, wheat is flying stealth in many of this era's most popular beers.

That wider silence on what wheat is and its virtues has consequences for us as brewers. We often add wheat reflexively, it seems. We add it because a recipe template calls for it, because someone heard it helps foam, because it's “what you do” in hazy beer.

But wheat is not neutral filler. It has specific flavor, mouthfeel, recipe, and process impacts—and we're in the best position to succeed when we use it with purpose. At its best, wheat is one of the most useful grains in the modern brewery.

So, here we'll consider wheat on its own terms—where and how we can use it, including some tips and tricks from top pros on how this quiet ingredient can help us make better beer.

Wheat as a Functional Grain

From a brewer's perspective, wheat is a winner.

It has robust extract potential, contributes proteins that improve head retention, and it (usually) integrates cleanly into the mash. That alone explains why it appears in so many recipes that never advertise it on the label. Wheat also works as a base grain or as any of a wide variety of specialty grains—in that sense, it's as versatile as barley.

In beers where wheat is front and center—say, upward of half of the grist—there tend to be flavors we recognize as “wheaty.”

Blake Tyers, cofounder and senior curiosity director at Creature Comforts in Atlanta, says wheat can contribute those good, grainy flavors in either its malted or raw forms. “We may use ... up to 40 percent of the grist in one of our wheat-forward beers like a Berliner weisse,” he says. “In the Berliner weisse application, I think our wheat brings a really nice base flavor.”

At Grimm Artisanal Ales in Brooklyn, New York, the Grimm Weisse gets 50 percent wheat malt. “To get a noteworthy wheaty flavor, you have to use a lot of it,” says cofounder and brewer Joe Grimm. At that level, wheat expresses a gently tart and lemony character that's impossible to miss.

Of course, those are *wheat beers*, driven by ample wheat flavor. It's a wonderful flavor, but wheat's contributions don't end there.

Malted wheat, Grimm says, is “functionally similar to malted barley in many ways,” but it has one meaningful advantage over other foam-enhancing malts: efficiency. Grimm, whose brewery is highly regarded for its hazy IPAs, says he frequently uses small amounts of wheat malt or chit malt across their lineup, spe-

Wheat is not neutral filler. It has specific flavor, mouthfeel, recipe, and process impacts—and we're in the best position to succeed when we use it with purpose. At its best, wheat is one of the most useful grains in the modern brewery.



cifically to reinforce foam. However, wheat offers better extract than chit, making it the more economical and versatile option. That alone makes wheat attractive—you're not sacrificing yield to improve presentation. Instead, you're stacking benefits.

Yet wheat's various forms as a brewing ingredient—chiefly malted, flaked, and raw, though there are others—all behave differently. Grimm says they primarily use malted wheat, but the brewery occasionally turns to flaked or raw wheat—often for color. Unmalted wheat produces a lighter-colored wort, and that can be useful in those pale hazies that seem to shine in the sun.

Tyers says that the Creature Comforts team found raw wheat to be less of a headache than expected. “We met the folks at DaySpring Farms, an organic wheat farm about 20 miles from our brewery, and tried out using their raw wheat in one of our recipes,” he says. “At first, we were a bit worried about using raw wheat and our ability to cereal cook, but [we] learned the gelatinization temp of wheat is in the range of a normal mash and found no issues.”

Most modern beers use wheat sparingly—it may be there in the 5 to 15 percent range, its influence more architectural than overt. That doesn't mean it's trivial. That just means its effects are cumulative and interactive.

At 10 percent of the grist, wheat won't scream “wheat,” but it *will* subtly affect mouthfeel, foam, the perception of acidity, and how hops present on the palate. In other words, it shapes the beer we taste, even if you wouldn't identify that beer as wheat-driven.

As with any useful tool, there are trade-offs—for example, both raw and flaked wheat contribute viscosity and require more attention to the mash, even as they contribute no helpful enzymes. Wheat rewards planning, and that's another kind of benefit:

Anything that gets us to slow down and make intentional choices is helpful because we should be doing that anyway.

Feelings, Flavors, and Foam

Wheat expresses itself in many distinct ways across several sensory areas, but especially in mouthfeel, flavor, and appearance.

Starting with the obvious: Yes, wheat contributes to texture.

“Wheat is a high-protein grain, like oats,” Tyers says, but “their effects on mouthfeel are a bit different.” He says he interprets oats as having a creaminess that kind of “hugs” the palate, while wheat creates a fluffiness that enriches mouthfeel but sits lighter. “A combination of both is something I really enjoy in our stouts.”

We also tend to think of wheat as a foam-builder, and many breweries—including Creature Comforts—use it in that role.

But these go-to applications aren't the whole story. Wheat also interacts with our other ingredients to produce unique flavors and perceptions. For example: Tyers says wheat is often a good complement to other mouthfeel-specific grist choices (such as oats).

In saison, weissbier, and some mixed-culture beers, wheat also serves as an important source of ferulic acid—a precursor to 4-vinyl guaiacol, the clove-like compound produced by phenolic yeast strains. Including a ferulic-acid rest in the mash allows us to actively shape how those phenols present, rather than leaving the outcome entirely to yeast genetics and fermentation conditions. Even in beers that don't scan as “wheat beers,” that interaction can matter, particularly when working with expressive yeast.

Grimm shares an especially illuminating insight on flavor and interactivity from a dry-

hopped experiment gone sideways. After brewing an IPA with their hefeweizen wort, the brewery noticed a drastically different hop character—it was more bracing, more tannic, and far drier than expected. The beer wasn't flawed, but it wasn't balanced.

Grimm attributes that outcome to the interaction between hop-derived and wheat-derived polyphenols, which together intensified astringency. High levels of wheat, he says, can contribute a drying mouthfeel that works in some contexts but quickly becomes overwhelming in others.

That's a critical takeaway for modern IPA brewers: Wheat can make a beer feel soft and fluffy, but it can also trigger structured, aggressive flavors that can be hard to drink. In Grimm's view, out-of-balance astringency is one of the most common flaws in hazy IPA, often mistaken for “boldness” when it's actually fatigue. His recommendation is blunt: Brew an IPA with 50 percent wheat at least once—not because it will be your best beer, but because it will teach you what wheat really does in that context.

The broader lesson is that wheat doesn't just affect foam and mouthfeel: It contributes to the flavors we get in the finished beer, both by influencing fermentation and by changing the expression of our other ingredients. To ignore that is to miss the full picture.

A Matter of Style

Wheat's role will vary by style, but perhaps nowhere is wheat more ubiquitous or misunderstood than in hazy IPA.

At Grimm Artisanal Ales, wheat is typically about 10 to 15 percent of the grist in a New England-style IPA. At that range, it's pulling multiple levers at once: improving extract efficiency, reinforcing



foam, contributing a subtle tart-citrus note, and acting as a minor haze contributor. However, Grimm is careful to dismantle one of the most persistent myths about the style: that the haze itself is driven primarily by wheat or oats.

“The desirable kind of milky haze in NEIPA,” Grimm says, “should be driven by dry hopping with T-90s in a beer that was fermented by specific yeast strains.”

Wheat plays a supporting role; it is not the star. In fact, you can make excellent hazy pale ales and IPAs with 100 percent barley. That distinction matters because it reframes wheat as a *supporting ingredient* rather than a shortcut. If you’re relying on wheat to do some heavy lifting to compensate for yeast choice, hop selection, or fermentation management, your beer is already in trouble.

Hazies aren’t the only IPAs that use wheat, however—the grain is making a quiet resurgence in West Coast-leaning IPA. As brewers pull those beers back toward softer bitterness, brighter hop aroma, and better foam stability—without sacrificing clarity—wheat has become a useful tool. Small additions can support head retention and mouthfeel while avoiding the sweetness or fullness associated with crystal malt. That means we can use wheat effectively, with restraint, in West Coast IPAs that want snap and precision, not plushness.

Pale lager may be the least-discussed context for wheat, but it’s arguably the most revealing. In these beers, also, wheat is less about flavor and more about its other contributions—foam and a softness of texture. A few percentage points of wheat in the grist can improve head retention dramatically, improving visual appeal and tactile presence without altering the lager’s clean profile.

Here, wheat functions almost like a brewing insurance policy: It makes the beer look *and* feel better without making it taste all that different. That may not be romantic, but it’s effective, and it’s one reason you’ll also see meaningful additions of wheat in other lagers, including bocks.

Don’t Get Stuck

For all its benefits, wheat extracts a cost, and that cost is most often paid in exactly one place: the mash tun.

Wheat has no husks. The addition of rice hulls is a common solution, and that’s what they do at Creature Comforts. “The huskless nature of wheat can create some sticky lautens if we aren’t paying attention.” Without that built-in filter bed, high-wheat grists are more prone to compaction, slow runoff, and stuck sparges. It’s the most common operational complaint associated with wheat, and it’s entirely predictable.

Grimm shares another practical tip: If high wheat proportions are causing problems, beta-glucanase enzyme in the mash can help improve lautering efficiency.

For the homebrewer, meanwhile, a pound of rice hulls per 10 pounds of grain—if you have anything like half the grist in wheat—is a simple rule of thumb that will save a lot of headaches.


Wheat as an Intentional Choice

The throughline in all of this is intention.

Wheat isn’t a gimmick. It’s not a haze-generator. And it’s not just a nod to tradition.

Wheat is a structurally important, chemically active brewing grain that adds subtle—but positive—elements to a range of styles. That quiet utility is exactly why wheat has become so prevalent in modern beer styles.

Brewers use wheat because it solves problems: foam stability, extract efficiency, mouthfeel, fermentation expression. In a brewing landscape increasingly focused on precision, balance, and drinkability, that makes it one of the most underrated tools in the brewhouse.

And perhaps the clearest sign of wheat’s modern relevance is this: Some of the most “not wheat beer” beers being made today wouldn’t be the same without it. 

MAKE IT

Creature Comforts DaySpring

Inspired by Belgian grisette, Creature Comforts in Athens, Georgia, labels this a “country wheat beer,” describing it as dry, grassy, herbal, and slightly fruity. Integral to the beer is raw, organic wheat from DaySpring Farms, about 20 miles north of the brewery, as well as malted wheat that was grown on the same farm.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 72%

OG: 1.040 (10°P)

FG: 1.002 (0.5°P)

IBUs: 27

ABV: 5.2%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

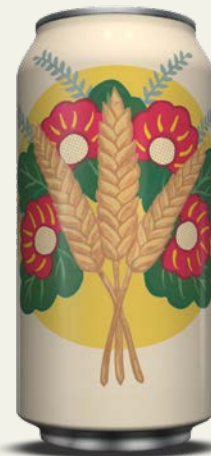
3.5 lb (1.6 kg) Dingemans Pilsen

1.4 lb (635 g) Weyermann Munich I

1.3 lb (590 g) wheat malt

1.3 lb (590 g) raw wheat

8 oz (227 g) rice hulls



HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

0.2 oz (6 g) Styrian Goldings at 60 minutes [4 IBUs]

1 tablet Whirlfloc at 15 minutes

2 oz (57 g) Styrian Goldings at whirlpool [23 IBUs]

YEAST

Your favorite bière de garde or saison strain, plus *Brettanomyces bruxellensis* var. *drei*

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains, mix in the rice hulls, and mash at 150°F (66°C) for 60 minutes. Raise to 172°F (78°C) and mash out. Recirculate until the runnings are free of husky material, then run off into the kettle. Sparge and top up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort, depending on your evaporation rate. Boil for 90 minutes, adding the hops and finings according to the schedule. After the boil, do a whirlpool step: Stir or recirculate to create a vortex, add the whirlpool hops, and allow 20 minutes to steep and settle. Chill to about 66°F (19°C), aerate the wort, and co-pitch both yeast strains. Ferment at 68°F (20°C). There should be a sharp fermentation for the first 7 days, then the *Sach* is done and the *Brett* goes to work. Drop 2°F (1°C) per day to hit 60°F (16°C) on Day 11—the idea is to encourage flocculation without putting our *Brett* to sleep. Transfer to secondary vessel at ambient room temperature (68–72°F/20–22°C) until gravity is stable, about 8–12 weeks, then bottle-condition for another 8–12 weeks, targeting 3.2 volumes of CO₂.

**BREWING
INGREDIENTS**

Fonio Calls

Brewers big and small are discovering the huge, modern potential of this tiny, ancient grain. **By Kate Bernot**

IF IT WEREN'T FOR Questlove, American brewers might never have heard of fonio.

In 2018, the Roots drummer hosted a Manhattan house party at which Brooklyn brewmaster Garrett Oliver found himself chatting with Senegalese-American chef and cookbook author Pierre Thiam. Just the year before, Thiam had cofounded Yolélé Foods with a mission to bring West African ingredients to American tables—beginning with a superfine, beige-colored grain called fonio.

Raising his voice over the ambient soundtrack, Thiam schooled Oliver on fonio's cultural and culinary importance: West African farmers have grown it as a staple crop for at least 5,000 years, prizing its nutty flavor, versatility in cooking and baking, and ease of cultivation. A remarkably hardy grain, fonio requires no irrigation, fertilizer, pesticides, or fungicides, and it can grow in areas otherwise considered nonarable. Today, it's still

grown by small-scale family farmers—not quite 1,000 of whom supply Yolélé Foods.

Naturally, Oliver had a follow-up question: Could you make beer with it?

In the years since, brewers have answered with a resounding yes.

Fonio's Foothold

Brooklyn Brewery continues to be fonio's leading advocate in beer, using it in a year-round pale ale called Fonio Rising as well as periodic one-offs.

Brooklyn also launched a global collaboration series to introduce the grain to other breweries, including Russian River, Guinness Open Gate, Thornbridge, and Carlsberg. Because of those collaborations plus its own beers, Brooklyn Brewery has become (as of early 2026) the largest buyer of fonio in the United States. Its total usage so far tops 10 tons.

However, fonio isn't a global commodity. Challenges with agricultural and pro-

cessing yields would make it difficult for larger breweries to reliably use fonio at scale. However, it's clearly proven viable at the craft scale: Both RahrBSG and Country Malt carry it, and—at last check—more than 200 beers listed on Untappd have a name that includes “fonio.”

It's one of those rare brewing ingredients that can generate excitement beyond a narrow subset of technically minded drinkers. The general public can readily grasp fonio's story, and they can appreciate its flavor. In food, such as pilafs or chips, people typically perceive fonio as nutty. When used in the grist, however, its tasting notes expand to include lychee, white grape, mango, and sauvignon blanc—appealing flavors that can fit with modern hops. Fans describe it as a minuscule grain with enormous possibilities.

However, the grain comes with some technical considerations for brewers. Its small size—almost sand-like, at less than



Garrett Oliver's Fonio FAQs

For fellow fonio-curious brewers anywhere in the world, Brooklyn brewmaster Garrett Oliver shares these tips based on what he's so far learned about the ancient African grain.

Q: How easy/hard is it to learn to brew with fonio—is it as simple as replacing barley with fonio, or is it more complicated than that?

A: The fonio that we're using, from Yolélé West Africa, is very easy to use in brewing. It's already been de-hulled, it requires no milling, and it's been pre-steamed, so the starch is already gelatinized. In the brewhouse, you're basically rehydrating it, then going straight into saccharification. We usually add it during the last saccharification rest in the mash; we find that we get the best flavors and aromas that way. Some of our collaborating breweries have already done their first fonio brews, and all the brew days have gone really well. Note that we did see one case of possibly incomplete pre-gelatinization of the fonio, resulting in lower extract—but on average, extraction is approximately 71 percent as opposed to the 76 percent or thereabouts for most malts.

Q: Fonio has a "nutty taste." What does it do to the taste of brews? Would a drinker distinguish a fonio brew from a non-fonio brew—and if so, what tastes different?

A: Fonio tastes "nutty" when eaten like couscous—which it resembles on the plate—but it doesn't really bring that flavor to beer. Instead, it brings tropical-fruity, wine-like flavors reminiscent of sauvignon blanc and gewürztraminer—lychee fruit, gooseberry, mango, etc. It also gives a soft, round, silky mouthfeel to beers. We're generally using it at 15 to 20 percent of the grist. The fonio "signature" flavors are always recognizable, and they don't seem to be yeast strain-dependent, so the flavors show up as strongly in lagers as they do in warmer fermentations. In a pale ale, those aromatics are a great complement to dry-hop aromatics; in a pilsner, they bring a really nice lilt of fruit to the profile. People often say, "Wow, this kinda smells like white wine," and they like that.

Q: How easy/hard was it to convince all these other big-name brewers to get on board with fonio in your Brewing for Impact series?

A: I was somewhat fascinated to see that it wasn't difficult at all! Once people tasted the beers and understood what a paradigm shift fonio could represent for brewing, everybody was interested. I think Carlsberg pretty much convinced themselves by making a 100 percent fonio beer that was fantastic—it's perfectly clear and has stone-fruit flavors that are somewhere between champagne and sake. We can't wait to see where they can take it. Guinness is already strongly engaged in Africa and is excited to learn more about what fonio can do. The thing about the big brewers is that they all have serious ESG (environment, sustainability, governance) goals, and fonio—given its total lack of inputs—aligns perfectly with what they want to do in the future.

Q: Supply and demand: How easy is it to source fonio at the moment, and would this be easy to scale up? Does a big supply of fonio already exist, or is it a question of creating the demand to encourage supply?

A: At a current 700,000 tons per year, African fonio production massively outstrips "sustainable barley" production (so far, at least). The work that Yolélé West Africa is doing will allow fonio to scale up in a big way because they're automating the de-husking and cleaning of the grain, which was the big bottleneck in the past. The automated cleaning will also decrease processing losses from close to 50 percent to nearly zero. Because fonio requires no irrigation, fertilizer, pesticides, or fungicides, land previously considered "nonarable" becomes productive. So, there's huge upside potential.

Of course, without sufficient demand, we're not going to see these resources developed, so there is a chicken-and-egg dynamic here. By creating demand in the brewing space, we hope to kick-start the upscaling of production to levels where this is a crop that major international brewers can easily make part of their total grain portfolio, spreading risk, creating great flavors, lowering our environmental impacts, and bringing economic security to thousands of smallhold African farmers. —Garrett Oliver

Its small size demands additional attention to water absorption and mash filtering. It also lacks barley malt's enzyme package and tends to lower a beer's pH.

a millimeter in diameter—demands additional attention to water absorption and mash filtering. Fonio available outside Africa is typically dehusked; it also lacks barley malt's enzyme package and tends to lower a beer's pH. For all those reasons, brewers generally keep fonio to a minority of the grain bill—anywhere from 15 to 35 percent. (Using a mash press and enzymes, at least two brewers have pushed the envelope to 100 percent—more on that below.)

The grain is remarkably versatile, and brewers are finding roles for it in lagers and IPAs, saisons and stouts. To make the most of it, however, it helps to know more about its unique character and how that plays with other ingredients.

The Flavor Thumbprint

Oliver receives so many questions about fonio that he's developed an informal FAQ document that he happily shares with curious brewers.

The document outlines Brooklyn's approach of using fonio at roughly 15 percent of the grist. At that amount—regardless of yeast strain—its signature qualities are already apparent. Those include the aforementioned fruity aroma and flavors as well as what Oliver describes as a "soft, round, silky mouthfeel" and a "clipped, focused" bitterness akin to sake's amino acid-derived bitterness.

He evangelizes about fonio with the fervor of a true believer.

"The fonio that we're using, from Yolélé, is very easy to use in brewing," he says. It's already been de-hulled, so it requires no milling. It's also been pre-steamed, so the starch is already gelatinized and ready to convert. Extraction clocks in at an average of 71 percent, not much lower than most malts (often around 76 percent). Brooklyn's brewers usually add fonio during the mash's final saccharification rest, finding that they derive maximum aroma and flavor that way. (If your rest is long—say, a full 40 to 60 minutes—Oliver recommends adding fonio for the last 20 to 30 minutes.)

"I'm not really hearing about technical problems," he says. "People find it very easy to use."

Others share his faith. Brewers report few, if any, technical problems related to fonio, particularly as a minority component of a grain bill. At less than 30 to 35 percent of the grist, it may not require rice hulls—though some breweries use them as insurance against stuck mashes.

Even at low percentages, there are tangible impacts on aroma, flavor, and texture. When Atlanta's Creature Comforts and Our Culture brewed their Fonio Lager with the grain at 20 percent of the mash, its tropical-fruity aromas pervaded the entire brewhouse—and they translated just as clearly into the final beer. To improve filtration and help break down beta glucans, the brewers also added rice hulls and the brewing enzyme Laminex to the mash. (As part of Creature Comfort's Brew for One initiative, proceeds from that beer benefited the Michael James Jackson Foundation, founded by Oliver.)

"You're only limited by the edge of your imagination when utilizing this grain, and all it takes is your ability to try," says Isaiah Smith, CEO and cofounder of Our Culture.

Smith and Jossette Footman-Smith—his wife and fellow Our Culture cofounder—had previously homebrewed batches of fonio lager and saison using up to 30 percent of the grain in the grist. Their advice:

- Homebrewers should consider a brew-in-a-bag setup because of the grain's sticky, fine nature—“like grits times four,” Footman-Smith says.
- They recommend using 50 percent more mash water, to help offset the high absorption rate.
- Rice hulls are “a must,” and enzymes can help if your system has a propensity for stuck mashes.

However, they characterize those as minor considerations with a worthwhile flavor payoff that's unusual for any grain. “Look at it as an opportunity to paint with a brush that you've never had before,” Smith says, “in a space where there is not really another viable innovation lever for flavor and aroma—not at this level.”

Vinnie Cilurzo, owner and brewer at Russian River in Windsor, California, agrees that fonio's vinous, lychee-like contributions defy what most people—brewers and drinkers alike—expect from malt. A Belgian-style blonde ale brewed with 30 percent fonio has become a semiregular beer at Russian River's taprooms—particularly during the warmer months, when its lean body and bright fruitiness feel especially appropriate.

Cilurzo says it doesn't take much fonio in the grist for it to have an impact. “My advice: You don't have to go all the way to 30 percent,” he says. “Fifteen to 20 percent will also leave a thumbprint on the beer.”

MAKE IT

Kiitos Fonio Fusion IPA

Patrick Bourque, head brewer at Kiitos in Salt Lake City, says they brewed this IPA to showcase fonio's unique flavors—such as passion fruit, lychee, and white peach—and how those flavors meld nicely with the flavors and aromas of modern hop varieties.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 72%

OG: 1.065 (15.8°P)

FG: 1.012 (3°P)

IBUs: 38

ABV: 7%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

6.3 lb (2.9 kg) Rahr Brewer's Standard

2-Row

6 lb (2.7 kg) fonio

8 oz (227 g) rice hulls

HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

0.3 oz (9 g) Simcoe at 30 minutes [11 IBUs]

0.5 oz (14 g) Citra at 5 minutes [9 IBUs]

Yeast nutrient at 5 minutes

1.9 oz (54 g) each Citra & Vera at whirlpool [18 IBUs]

2.5 oz (71 g) each Citra & Vera at dry hop

YEAST

Conan strain—such as Escarpment Vermont Ale, Imperial A04 Barbarian, Omega OYL-052 DIPA Ale, White Labs WLP095 Burlington Ale—or other English ale strain

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains, mix in the rice hulls, and mash at 150°F (66°C) for 45 minutes, raise to 162°F (72°C) for 20 minutes, then raise to 170°F (77°C) and mash out. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle. Sparge and top up as needed to get about 6.5 gallons (25 liters) of wort, depending on your evaporation rate. Boil for 60 minutes, adding the hops and nutrient according to the schedule. After the boil, do a whirlpool step: Stir or recirculate to create a vortex, cooling the wort to 180°F (82°C), and add the whirlpool hops. Allow 20 minutes to steep, then chill to about 66°F (19°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 68°F (20°C) until the beer is about 50 percent attenuated (1.032/8°P), then raise to 72°F (22°C) for a diacetyl rest. Once fermentation is complete and the beer has passed VDK (see “Hunting for Diacetyl,” beerandbrewing.com), crash to 58°F (14°C). Drop the yeast (or rack to secondary) and add the dry hops for 2–3 days. Drop/remove the hops, then package and carbonate to about 2.7 volumes of CO₂.

BREWER'S NOTES

Rice hulls: Adjust the amount depending on how well your own system lauters.

Water: We used a balanced profile of 125 ppm calcium sulfate and 125 ppm calcium chloride, while keeping total calcium levels around 60–80 ppm.

pH: We aim for 5.2–5.4 in the mash and 5.1–5.2 at knockout.

Hops: Feel free to play around with any modern hop profile. Noble-type hops seem to clash with fonio, so stick with fruit-forward or more tropical varieties. Fonio seems to have its own slight bitterness, so try to keep total IBUs below 40—past that, it becomes harsh and noticeable.

Nutrient: Use the upper end of the manufacturer's recommended dose because fonio doesn't supply any free-amino nitrogen (FAN).

“I’m able to derive this flavor profile of a Hallertau Blanc or something like that, and I use an ingredient that costs \$2 a pound to get there. So, that’s the way you think about the economics. Your cost of ingredients may go up at the item level, but the overall batch cost is lower.”

He says the Russian River team is planning to brew pilot batches with up to 50 percent fonio, potentially adding barley hulls in place of rice hulls. “If we’re going to do it, we’re going to make it impactful,” Cilurzo says. “I’m curious to push the limit even more.”

Take It to the Limit

One brewery that’s already pushing fonio to its utmost limits is Salt Lake City’s Kiitos.

In January 2025, Kiitos became the first U.S. brewery to release a beer made with a grist of 100 percent fonio. (Denmark-based Carlsberg brewed a 100 percent fonio beer in collaboration with Brooklyn in July 2024.)

When Kiitos brewing director Patrick Bourque first heard about the grain, he thought it would be a logical ingredient to try—Kiitos has a mash press and had previously brewed a beer from 100 percent millet. Since brewing the all-fonio beer (simply named Fonio), he’s also incorporated the grain into IPAs and sour beers, and he has notions of brewing a strong, barleywine-style beer entirely with fonio.

Kiitos Fonio has a starting gravity of 12°P (1.048) and finishes out to about 5 percent ABV, but not much else about the beer is conventional. Fonio is technically a type of millet; like other millets, it’s gluten-free. Kiitos brews other gluten-free beers, and Bourque says he wants those to taste “like beer.” Not so with Fonio. “I don’t want anyone to try this and expect a beer,” he says.

The finished product is crystal-clear with a fruity dryness that evokes sparkling white wine more than anything else. Because of the huge fruit aromas and flavors, Bourque says fellow brewers can’t believe there are no hops and no thiolized yeast involved.

While brewers don’t necessarily have to forgo hops altogether, the grain’s character does provide an opportunity to reduce them—

perhaps offsetting fonio’s cost of about \$2 per pound. Even in beers that use fonio at small percentages, brewers say they find they can reduce hop usage substantially.

The Our Culture–Creature Comforts Fonio Lager got 44 pounds of hops for 60 barrels of beer—just a small bittering addition and the rest in the whirlpool. (That scales down to about 1.9 ounces/54 grams for a five-gallon/19-liter batch.)

“I’m able to derive this flavor profile of a Hallertau Blanc or something like that, and I use an ingredient that costs \$2 a pound to get there,” says Our Culture’s Smith. “So, that’s the way you think about the economics. Your cost of ingredients may go up at the item level, but the overall batch cost is lower.”

Brewing an all-fonio beer without a mash press would be challenging. However,



Cilurzo at Russian River sees potential for higher levels of fonio—including beers that are gluten-free or gluten-reduced, offering unique textures and flavors that can appeal to those who often prefer wines or cocktails to beer.

“When I had the 100 percent fonio beer from Kiitos, I thought, ‘This could be an alternative to a seltzer while still staying true to yourself [as a brewer], if seltzers aren’t your thing,’” Cilurzo says. He also muses on the potential flavor combinations that might be found by adding fruit to an all-fonio beer. “It struck me as a way for a brewery that does have a mash filter to make something really unique.”

To get the seltzer-like profile of its all-fonio beer, Kiitos adds a combination of amyloglucosidase and pullulanase enzymes to cleave the more complex dextrins and help dry out the beer. Even so, the beer goes through what Bourque calls a “glucose stall,” when fermentation slows over the course of its few final days, ultimately finishing slightly higher than a more conventional beer would. Nutrient additions don’t seem to affect that tendency, and it’s never led to refermentation in the package.

Bourque also notes that acidity can be a concern in all-fonio beers. Without buffering—Kiitos uses calcium carbonate—the beer’s pH can threaten to drop below 3. There’s another notable attribute that both Bourque and Cilurzo mention: Fonio appears to have very low to no free amino nitrogen—a real boon to shelf stability.

The Fonio Call to Action

Kiitos uses the grain in other beers, including an IPA with a grist of 50/50 pilsner malt and fonio, hopped with Citra and Vera. Bourque’s growing experience with the grain has made him another resource for fonio-curious brewers.

“Mostly when people reach out, they’re curious about the flavor profile,” he says. “The sauvignon blanc thing nails it on the head. For us, that’s pure fonio. As far as what it brings to an IPA ... I don’t know where the hops end and where the fonio begins, but there is a tropical passion fruit–guava thing that’s very complementary.”

There’s still a lot that’s unknown about why fonio presents like it does in beer. How can this nutty cereal express as wine-like and tropical once it’s brewed? Cilurzo hypothesizes that some sort of biotransformation could be at work, but no one is certain yet. Research on the grain’s brewing properties is still scant, though brewers of all sizes are eager to try it. As fonio becomes more widely used, particularly by larger breweries, no doubt those studies will follow.

Still, the best way to grasp this tiny grain’s huge potential is to simply taste it. Our Culture, Brooklyn, and Russian River have all done some version of fonio beer-and-food pairings to drive home how divergent its flavors are in those varied applications. A fonio beer alongside fonio fritters, croquettes, chips, grits, or even soup presents guests with a memorable sensory lightbulb moment they’re unlikely to have encountered before.

Rarely does a totally new, impactful brewing ingredient come along—particularly one that’s simple for the general public to grasp. Fonio’s fans among brewers make the case that the grain is sustainable, economically empowering, exciting to drinkers, and—most importantly—delicious.

“The call to action here is that there’s not a lot of research on this grain,” says Smith at Our Culture. “There’s not a lot of funding for research on grain. So, let’s adopt it and change that. It’s never going to 100 percent replace barley, so I don’t think we should be looking at this as an opposition to the current infrastructure so much as an evolution of opportunity and of innovation.”

PHOTOS FROM LEFT: MATT GRAVES/WWW.MATTGRAVESPHOTO.COM; ERIC THOMAS

MAKE IT

Vine Street Black Is Beautiful Fonio Ale

Missouri’s first Black-owned brewery, Kansas City’s Vine Street, released this riff on the Black Is Beautiful open-source collab in 2025. This crisp, easy-drinking golden ale combines the West African grain’s tropical flavor with a hit of Citra for notes of lemon-lime and white wine.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)
Brewhouse efficiency: 72%
OG: 1.046 (11.4°P)
FG: 1.010 (2.6°P)
IBUs: 22
ABV: 4.7%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

5.2 lb (2.4 kg) Rahr Premium Pilsner
2.4 lb (1.1 kg) fonio
1.3 lb (590 g) dextrin malt

HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

0.5 oz (14 g) Sterling at first wort [14 IBUs]
1 tablet Whirlfloc at 5 minutes
0.4 oz (11 g) Citra at whirlpool [8 IBUs]

YEAST

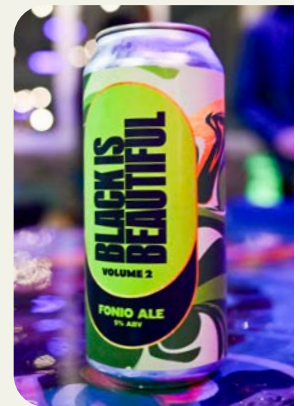
Lallemand LalBrew House Ale

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains and mash at 152°F (67°C) for 60 minutes. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle with the hops. Sparge and top up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort, depending on your evaporation rate. Boil for 60 minutes, adding the finings according to the schedule. After the boil, do a whirlpool step: Stir or recirculate to create a vortex, then add the whirlpool hops (at about 204°F/96°C); continue to spin for 5 minutes, then allow 15 minutes to steep and settle. Chill to about 65°F (18°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 67°F (19°C) until complete and gravity has stabilized. Once the beer has passed VDK (see “Hunting for Diacetyl,” beerandbrewing.com), crash, package, and carbonate to about 2.6 volumes of CO₂.

BREWER’S NOTES

Water profile: Shoot for a 1.25 sulfate-chloride ratio. We also target a mash pH of 5.2; the sparge water pH should be lower than 6.



BREWERS' PERSPECTIVE

Of Malt & Medals

Denver's **River North** is winning international awards and a strong reputation for its deep, dark, malt-forward beers—especially its range of porters, including brown, coffee-infused, imperial, and barrel-aged. Here, owner **Matt Hess** and head brewer **Matt Malloy** share the thinking and process behind these weighty, flavorsome beers. **As told to Ryan Pachmayer**

WE BREW OUR LOWER-ALCOHOL

porters and stouts on our smaller, seven-barrel system. We want to be able to iterate on the changes we're making to each batch, and we also want to keep the beer fresh, of course. We get more of an opportunity to improve our beers with the smaller batch size.

We are known for making higher-ABV beers. The barrel-aged beer often outsells the non-barrel-aged. We make the higher-ABV beers on the 15-barrel system, so we can designate a portion of the batch for barrel aging.

A Focus on Malt

The base malt for most of our lower-alcohol English-style brown ales and porters—West End Squirrels and Uptown Squirrel—is Crisp Maris Otter No. 19. It provides a touch more richness than we can get from our standard base malt.

We also liked the beers when we made them with standard two-row—but when we brewed Uptown Squirrel for the first

time with Maris Otter, that batch won a gold medal and Best American Beer at the 2024 Brussels Beer Challenge.

We do our best to differentiate our stouts from our porters, but in all honesty, those differences can be nuanced. Roasted barley (unmalted) is an important component of most stouts—at least in some small quantity—but it doesn't belong in a porter. In our porters, we lean toward the chocolate malts more than the heavily roasted ones, with a splash of something like Briess Midnight Wheat, which has a softer character than some of the roasted barley malts. It imparts complexity without harshness because it doesn't have a husk.

We've used Crisp Chocolate in the past, and it was quite good. Our current go-to is Simpsons Export Pale Chocolate (200–250°L) for its more delicate light-roast character. We use Simpsons Export Brown Malt (36–45°L) as well. We always add our dark malts to the full mash, not just at the end. We want the full flavor of the

grain, not just the color. We sometimes use a small amount of Weyermann Carafa Special II for color adjustment.

For crystal malts, we prefer the English varieties from Simpsons and Crisp. A layer of medium-dark or dark crystal in the 5 to 10 percent range tends to work well. Flaked wheat and oats add just enough mouthfeel and body to the beer, while biscuit malt is there for depth and complexity, adding a breadly toastiness that plays really well with the chocolate.

We've tried a few darker malts, including coffee malts, that didn't work out how we'd hoped. When we're doing smaller batches, we like to try one new malt at a time to see whether we like the results.

With our hop choices, we're just trying to balance these beers. For bittering, any high-alpha hop, such as Columbus, works well. For the late addition we use something classic, Noble or Noble-adjacent. Willamette has been a favorite for many years.

Fermentation

We use Fermentis SafAle S-04 for the English-style lower-ABV beers. Because of its low attenuation, this yeast is not well suited for the higher-ABV beers, which could end up too thick and cloying. But that residual body and moderate sweetness are essential to our lower-ABV porters.

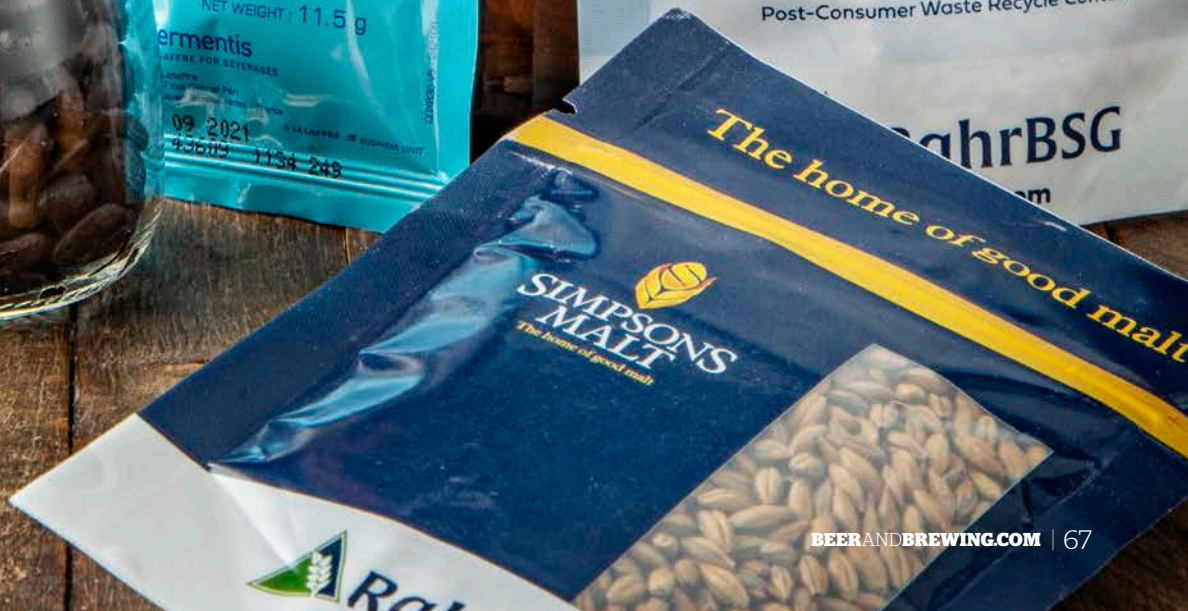
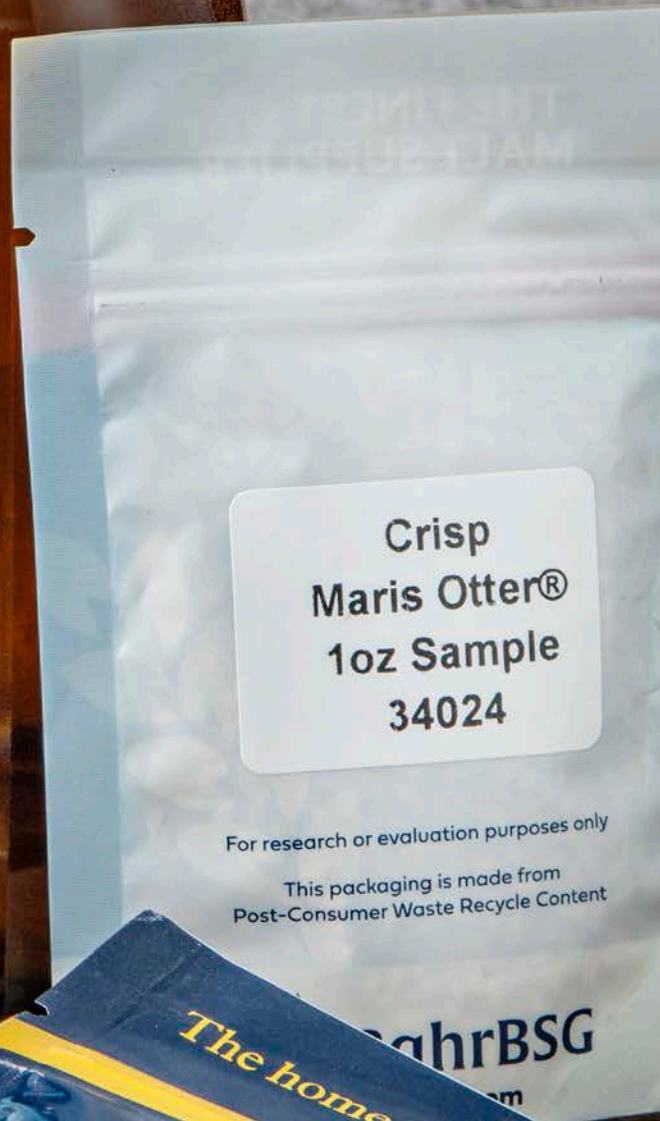
In the bigger porters such as Hello Darkness, we blend in a more attenuative, neutral yeast strain such as Chico to improve attenuation while retaining some of the English-style complexity.

For a seven-barrel batch, a 500-gram pack of dry yeast is adequate for a 5 percent ABV beer. But for a higher-ABV beer at the same volume, we need to pitch two to three times that amount.

Hitting our target starting gravity for the high-ABV beers can be a challenge. If our gravity is low, we either increase boil time, or we add brewer's crystals or dry malt extract (DME). The important part is creating the right starting conditions for a healthy fermentation with a precise balance of volume, gravity, and adequate yeast.

We ferment the lower-ABV beers on the cold side—we want to restrain the esters a bit. Our set point for the smaller beers is 66°F (19°C); it's 68°F (20°C) for the imperials.

We've made many changes based on competition feedback over the years. We read through the judging sheets religiously. Some of the big adjustments have been carbonation, mouthfeel, attenuation, and body. All variables are fair game for reevaluation.



MAKE IT

River North Uptown Squirrel English Brown Porter

This session-strength, English-inspired porter won a gold medal and Best American Beer at the 2024 Brussels Beer Challenge.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)
Brewhouse efficiency: 72%
OG: 1.056 (13.8°P)
FG: 1.022 (5.5°P)
IBUs: 18
ABV: 4.5%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

4.4 lb (2 kg) Crisp No. 19
Maris Otter Ale
1.8 lb (816 g) biscuit
1.4 lb (635 g) Simpsons Crystal Dark Medium (72–85°L)
1.4 lb (635 g) Simpsons Export Pale Brown (36–45°L)
11 oz (312 g) flaked oats
11 oz (312 g) Weyermann Carafa
7 oz (198 g) Simpsons Export Pale Chocolate (200–250°L)
1.5 oz (43 g) Weyermann Carafa Special II

HOPS & ADDITIONS
SCHEDULE

0.3 oz (9 g) Columbus at 90 minutes [15 IBUs]
1 tablet Whirlfloc at 75 minutes
Servomyces yeast nutrient at 10 minutes
0.5 oz (14 g) Willamette at 10 minutes [3 IBU]

YEAST

Fermentis SafAle S-04

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains and mash in at 155°F (68°C), adjusting if needed to target a mash pH of 5.5–5.6. Mash for 45 minutes, then recirculate until the runnings are clear. Sparge as needed until the kettle gravity is about 1.050

(12.5°P). Boil for 90 minutes, adding hops, finings, and nutrient according to the schedule. After the boil, chill to 66°F (19°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 67°F (19°C) for 3 days, then raise to 69°F (21°C) until fermentation is complete and the beer has passed forced diacetyl tests for 2 days in a row (see “Hunting for Diacetyl,” beerandbrewing.com). Then crash, package, and carbonate.

BREWERS' NOTES

Water: We loosely target a London-type profile high in calcium carbonate (chalk) to help buffer the dark malts' acidity. That may not be necessary if you have very hard water. Chalk is difficult to dissolve, so add it directly to your mash and mix well. Sulfate from gypsum should be moderate to low—we're not trying to accentuate bitterness. Chloride should be moderate to high, to elevate maltiness. Some basic targets: 150–200 ppm carbonate, 30–50 ppm sulfate, and 75–100 ppm chloride.

Color: If you need to sub for the dark malts, look for similar Lovibond numbers. The beer's target SRM is 29.

Fermentation: With this yeast strain, don't skip the diacetyl rest, or be sure to add ALDC at the start of fermentation. Test for VDK if you can—if you're unsure whether your diacetyl rest is long enough, the answer is probably not.



Approach to Competitions

We send both bottles and cans to competitions. It's about what beer we have ready—or planned to have ready, weeks or months in advance of each competition.

If it's a beer that needs to be fresh and we don't have a fresh batch, we won't enter it. If we have two different batches of the same beer, we taste them side by side and pick the best.

We think bottles judge a little better because they retain more carbonation during packaging. A lot of brewers have a love-hate relationship with the Meheen bottler, but it's a double-evac, pre-purge, counterpressure filler. For all its quirks, to us, it is indispensable. The fills are low-oxygen all the way through.

We've made many changes based on competition feedback over the years. We read through the judging sheets religiously. Some of the big adjustments have been carbonation, mouthfeel, attenuation, and body. All variables are fair game for reevaluation, especially when we see parallel feedback from more than one competition.

Adding Coffee

Combining two of the greatest beverages in the world is one of our favorite things to do (although coffee is still second place to beer, of course).

We always use whole beans, working with our friends at Logan House Coffee in Denver. They have a few shops around town and roast their own beans. When we're planning a beer with coffee, we try to meet up, taste some of the freshly roasted blends, and choose our favorite.

It's important to work with a roaster you know and trust—one who will get you beans that are fresh and roasted to the level that suits the beer. If we taste a few coffees, and we feel like they are not capturing the desired flavor profile, then Logan House has the expertise to change the blend and roasting parameters for next time.

Achieving the right coffee character has become a moving target. We are trying to re-create some of the flavors that have been favorites in the past, but certain origins are becoming more difficult to source. The coffee we use is almost always a blend of beans from several origins in the medium-roast range. Dark-roast coffee is a go-to for sipping first thing in the morning, but that doesn't necessarily translate as well into the beer. There's not enough complexity, or it can have an ashy character.

Four to eight pounds of coffee per barrel—roughly two to four ounces per gallon, or 15 to 30 grams per liter—is the sweet spot, depending on the base beer style. An imperial porter would be on the higher side, while a brown ale needs less to impart a balanced character.

We've used beans as soon as the day after roasting, and the beer wasn't too astringent or oily. Freshly roasted beans off-gas CO₂ for several days after roasting, which also may benefit the beer's shelf life.

We rarely add beans to a tank mid-fermentation. Once the beer reaches terminal gravity, we transfer onto the fresh beans in a purged tank. Depending on the production schedule, we rest the beer on the beans for 24 to 48 hours at room temperature or up to four days at cold temperatures. Both methods yield exceptional coffee character.



WATCH & LEARN!

For more about the methods and philosophy behind River North's robust and flavorful award-winning beers, check out our video course **Brewing Impactful High-Gravity Beers with River North.**

Very Strong Imperial and Barrel-Aged Porters

For our strongest porters—such as Dark Sorceress, part of our Decennial and Vicennial Series—we can reach 15 to 18 percent ABV in primary fermentation under the right conditions.

Achieving those levels requires the addition of simple sugars during fermentation. Sometimes we'll stagger the extra fermentable additions in two stages, if we're worried about the health of the yeast. Timing is everything. If we add the sugar too late, the yeast may not be healthy enough to complete fermentation—but all is not lost in that scenario. We can age these under-attenuated batches in barrels and use them as blending components to help balance barrel-aged versions of the beer.

Picking the right yeast is one of the most critical parts of the process. If treated properly, many different strains can successfully ferment these beers—with a very high pitch rate, most strains can far exceed their stated ABV range. For these higher-ABV beers, we typically use a blend of strains—American and English, American and Belgian, or multiple Belgian strains. We add oxygen through a carbonation stone within 18 hours of starting fermentation. Using a yeast nutrient such as Servomyces is also key.

We mostly use dry yeast for the big beers. We're a small brewery, so keeping many different strains on hand and healthy at any given time can be difficult. When we started these projects years ago, we had a ready supply of Belgian strains from batches that were already in the tank. Since then, we've broadened the styles we make, so dry yeast is an important tool for us.

Most of these beers are ready for barrels in about three weeks. The time spent aging in barrels depends on the beer and the barrel itself—12 months to (we presume) infinity. Colorado has such a dry climate, volume loss through evaporation can be rapid. With some of the older, two-to-three-year-old barrels, we'll top them off with fresh beer—especially if it's a double-barrel-aged project.

We're fortunate in Colorado to have many great local distillers. We reach out to them directly if we can, to ask what they have fresh or will have soon. Sometimes, the distillers we know well will contact us about some upcoming exceptional or unique barrels. If the schedule allows, we brew a special batch specifically for those barrels, and we are ready to fill those barrels in just a few weeks.

If we ever get barrels that are too dry to fill, we don't rehydrate them. The barrel character will be muted or, even worse, musty and unpleasant. It's better to find a different barrel.



MAKE IT

River North Hello Darkness Imperial Porter

From the team at Denver's River North, here's a recipe for the beefed-up porter that won a silver medal at the 2022 Great American Beer Festival and gold at the 2024 U.S. Open Beer Championship.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)
Brewhouse efficiency: 72%
OG: 1.110 (26°P)
FG: 1.036 (9°P)
IBUs: 28
SRM: 42
ABV: 9.8%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

15.1 lb (6.8 kg) two-row
2.2 lb (1 kg) Simpsons Export Pale Chocolate (200–250°L)
1.8 lb (816 g) biscuit
1.1 lb (500 g) flaked oats
1.1 lb (500 g) flaked wheat
8 oz (227 g) rice hulls

HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

0.75 oz (21 g) Columbus at 90 minutes [25 IBUs]
1 tablet Whirlfloc at 75 minutes
Servomyces yeast nutrient at 10 minutes
0.75 oz (21 g) Willamette at 10 minutes [3 IBUs]

YEAST

Co-pitch two parts Fermentis SafAle S-04 with one part Fermentis SafAle US-05, or the same ratio with similar strains (see below)

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains, mix in the rice hulls, and mash at 155–156°F (68–69°C) for 45 minutes. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle. Sparge as needed until the pre-boil gravity in the kettle reaches about 1.100 (23–24°P). (You might also need an extended boil and/or some DME to hit your target OG; see Brewer's Notes.) Boil for at least 90 minutes, adding hops, finings, and yeast nutrient according to the schedule. After the boil, chill to 66°F (19°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast.

Ferment at 67°F (19°C) for 3 days, then raise to 69°F (21°C) until fermentation is complete and the beer has passed forced diacetyl tests for 2 days in a row (see "Hunting for Diacetyl," beerandbrewing.com). Then crash, package, and carbonate.

BREWER'S NOTES

Water: London-like profile, same as for Uptown Squirrel—see page 68.

High Gravity: These big mashes with thick grain beds are notoriously inefficient—your mileage may vary. Pack the tun full and do the best you can.

If it's too much for your mash tun, you can replace 10–15 percent of the two-row with dry malt extract (DME). It's also a good idea to have DME or brewer's crystals on hand to make up for any shortfalls because of inefficiency; you might also need an extended boil to hit the OG.

Servomyces: How much to add depends on the product and your wort volume; follow the manufacturer's guidelines.

Yeast: For these bigger porters, we pitch English and American ale yeasts at a 2:1 ratio, respectively. You could also use similar strains from different labs, such as Wyeast 1026 British Cask Ale and 1056 American Ale.



BREWING TECHNOLOGY

Preserve the Union

In England's East Midlands, the brewing trailblazer Thornbridge has rescued and is continuing to use a vital piece of British brewing heritage—an original Burton Union system. More than just a museum piece, the technology lends a suppleness to the ales that course through it. **By Matthew Curtis**

THE TOWN OF BAKEWELL, Derbyshire, is arguably more popular with people visiting locations featured in the BBC rendition of *Pride & Prejudice* than it is with those looking to experience one of Britain's best-regarded breweries. Take a stroll there, and you might well hear the occasional American accent seeking their own version of Jane Austen's England.

Many of those visitors, however, would do well to find their way over to the Riverside Business Park on the town's outskirts. Here they'll find a pair of buildings—a production facility and spacious taproom—that are home to Thornbridge Brewery.

Established in 2007 by Jim Harrison and Simon Webster, Thornbridge marked its name in beer history the same year when it released Jaipur, a 5.9 percent ABV American-style IPA that has remained the brewery's flagship. Relocating to its present

home in September 2009, it now brews in a large and resolutely contemporary facility that wouldn't look out of place if you landed it in the center of most U.S. cities.

Not everything inside, however, is resolutely contemporary.

A Legacy Continues

Behind the brewery's taproom is a second, smaller production facility. It's home to Thornbridge's original 15-hectoliter (13-barrel) setup, now dwarfed by the 50-hectoliter facility with accompanying tank farm and packaging hall next door.

That original brewhouse isn't alone. Just opposite is a distinctive, curious-looking contraption—notable for its size, but also because of how unusual it looks.

Thornbridge's Burton Union system stands about 12 feet (3.6 meters) tall. Its steel frame forms a cage around six rotund

oak barrels, arranged in two rows of three at its base; faded metal hoops bind together their staves, and the heads of the barrels wear black cast-iron crosses. A network of pipes protrudes from the barrels, leading to a pair of containers reminiscent of small coolships. At the side, a stepladder climbs to a small platform, where six swan-necked pipes stretch up and over into the two troughs. Here, the system collects wort and recirculates it through the barrels during the fermentation process.

The barrels are neutral and add no flavor. The point of the system, originally, was efficiency and consistency. It separated fresh kräusen from the beer while minimizing head space and keeping out spoilage bacteria. It also enabled a degree of temperature stability during fermentation.

This particular Union system was originally commissioned in 1898. At present, it's the last of its kind still operating in the United Kingdom.

"It makes me very happy," says Dominic Driscoll, brewing manager at Thornbridge. "Being part of the whole project of bringing the [Burton Union] in and coming up with recipes for it has revitalized my love for making beer in the first place."

The Union system at Thornbridge was one of a pair that were rescued from being scrapped by its previous owner, Carlsberg. Formerly housed in Burton-upon-Trent at Marston's Brewing, the Danish giant—which began its merger with Marston's in 2020—announced in January 2024 that it would be "retiring" the four remaining systems in use at Marston's. That led to a not-inconsiderable amount of outrage

Why would a modern brewery like Thornbridge want to invest in the maintenance and upkeep of a piece of equipment that was developed more than a century ago? As a piece of brewing technology, it's positively archaic.





from British beer enthusiasts and commentators. “Here’s a memo to Carlsberg, purveyor of Eurofizz to the masses,” wrote Roger Protz, veteran beer writer. “Don’t dump on our proud ale heritage.”

Step in one Garrett Oliver. The Brooklyn brewmaster has strong connections at Carlsberg, which has been Brooklyn’s European distribution partner for several years. Oliver was able to convince Carlsberg that the Union sets deserved to be rehomed.

After a lot of work—much of it by Marston’s now-retired cooper Mark Newton—one of the two remaining unions found its way to Thornbridge. (That work also included a few modifications, such as an acrylic lid fitted to its upper troughs to keep out potential contaminants.)

The question is, why would a modern brewery like Thornbridge want to invest in the maintenance and upkeep of a piece of equipment that was developed more than a century ago? Sure, the optics are fantastic—who wouldn’t want to own and proudly show off a genuine piece of British brewing heritage? As a piece of brewing technology, however, it’s positively archaic. Because of its nature, this Burton Union system requires 42 hectoliters (or about 36 barrels) of fresh wort

every two weeks. Otherwise, the wooden barrels that are inherent to what makes it so special will begin to fail.

“There’s something romantic about brewing a beer and then treating it in the same way as a beer might have been in the 19th century,” says Thornbridge cofounder Simon Webster. “Having that little bit of history that doesn’t exist anywhere else in the world? That’s too good of an opportunity to miss.”

Fermenting in the Union

The Thornbridge team doesn’t transfer fresh wort directly into the Burton Union.

Instead, they brew a big batch in the main brewhouse across the way and begin primary fermentation over there, in stainless. Then, after about 15 to 17 hours, they pump the fermenting beer to the taproom building. There’s no hard piping in place, so they run about 300 feet of hose down the small gravel pathway behind the brewery and taproom. After cleaning the Union, they pump over the 68°F (20°C) wort. Within minutes of cascading from the swan necks, kräusen begins to form in the collecting tray.

“We’re essentially mimicking what we saw at Marston’s,” Driscoll says, “where the wort

was sent from the brewhouse to a collection vessel, and yeast was pitched and essentially allowed to get going in the lag phase, [to] use up the oxygen before being dropped into the Union sets. By doing this method, you also leave behind a good degree of unwanted sediment. It is a bit like the old German breweries and their flotation vessels.”

The system presents an interesting challenge, however: How to maintain a consistent fermentation temperature inside each of the six barrels? Because of the Union’s nature, different amounts of yeast are at work in each barrel. Their positioning also affects temperature—some, for example, are nearer to an open shutter, exposed to cooler air in winter.

“We had to modify the cooling a little bit due to the differences in temperature in each barrel,” Driscoll says. “There have been a number of challenges, including working out how to clean it safely. But now it’s singing its song.”

The solution was to use a buffer tank of cold water that flows through copper coils in each barrel, effectively working like compact heat exchangers. They aim to cap fermentation at about 72°F (22°C), and they typically let it run seven days before transferring to holding tanks ahead of packaging.

Drinking a Union Beer

Thornbridge brews to slightly different strengths for cask and bottle, Driscoll says. The batches for cask have a bit lower original gravity, to ensure they finish a little drier, lending them that key cask drinkability.

And let me add with enthusiasm: The Burton Union produces beers that demand to be drunk. On rare occasions, they'll run a batch of their flagship IPA, Jaipur, through it. While the differences are subtle, they are most definitely noticeable.

Jaipur is notable for its rasping bitterness, notes of pithy orange, and the cracker-crunch of malted barley. From the Union, though, Jaipur takes on a softer character—as though its jagged edges have been gently rounded.


It's not only Jaipur, though. The union definitely adds a noticeable softness to the beers it's used to ferment. For Thornbridge, those now include two core beers exclusively produced using the Union: a 4.5 percent ABV pale ale called 1838—named for the year that Burton Unions went into use—and a robust English IPA of 7 percent ABV, simply known as The Union.

To ensure the Union and its barrels are fed every two weeks, Thornbridge alternates: One run will be a core beer, and the next a collaboration with enthusiastic peers. Several notable brewers already have visited Thornbridge to participate—including Doug Odell, who gave a version of his Scottish-style ale, Odell 90 Shilling, the Union treatment. Garrett Oliver, a regular visitor at Thornbridge, worked with Driscoll to develop Strong Dark Mild—a deep and delicious ale of 6.5 percent ABV; the country's Brewer's Choice Awards in 2025 named it New Beer of the Year.

The most recent invitee was Mark Slater, head brewer at Theakston in Masham, North Yorkshire. His visit was an opportunity to give the Union treatment to a genuine classic: Masham Ale, a strong, amber-colored English ale typically brewed for the winter months.

Theakston typically ferments in its open Yorkshire squares, with much of the beers' character driven by a house yeast culture that is several thousand generations old. From the Union, however, the beer took on a different character, eschewing its typical banana-like esters for more malt richness and peppery hops.

It was more proof, if needed, that the Union has a direct impact on the flavor of the beers it's used to produce.

"Thanks to Thornbridge, this is the only place in the world you can now brew on an original Union system," Slater says. "It's iconic. To be able to brew on it was an opportunity that was too good to miss." 

MAKE IT

Thornbridge The Union IPA

You may not be able to ferment in a proper Burton Union—though we wouldn't put it past some of you to build your own—but you can brew your own version of this beer that Thornbridge developed specifically for the country's last working Union set.

"This is a classic British-style IPA designed to celebrate the best character of British brewing ingredients," says brewing director Dominic Driscoll. "It's a big, malty beer balanced with the traditional invert-sugar addition, which adds another layer of toffee-caramel flavor and aids drinkability. The hops pack a bitter punch but offset the residual sweetness and malt character, lending an earthy aroma."

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 72%

OG: 1.062 (15.2°P)

FG: 1.010 (2.5°P)

IBUs: 55

ABV: 7%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

8.2 lb (3.7 kg) Maris Otter

12 oz (340 g) Munich

2 oz (57 g) Simpsons Crystal T50

HOPS & ADDITIONS SCHEDULE

1.4 lb (635 g) invert sugar No. 2 at first wort

0.6 oz (17 g) Target T-90s at first wort [24 IBUs]

2.7 oz (77 g) whole-leaf East Kent Goldings at flameout [11 IBUs]

1.8 oz (51 g) whole-leaf Northdown at flameout [9 IBUs]

1.8 oz (51 g) each East Kent Goldings and Northdown T-90s at whirlpool [11 IBUs]

YEAST

50/50 blend of American and English ale strains, such as Fermentis SafAle US-05 and S-04, or White Labs WLP001 California Ale and White Labs WLP005 British Ale

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains and mash at 154°F (68°C) for 60 minutes. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle with the invert sugar and first-wort hops. Sparge and top up as needed to get about 6 gallons (23 liters) of wort, depending on your evaporation rate. Boil for 75 minutes, adding hops according to the schedule. At flameout, add the whole-leaf hops in a hop spider or similar device,

then do a whirlpool step: Stir or recirculate to create a vortex while cooling the wort to about 176°F (80°C), then remove the hop spider and add the whirlpool hops; spin 5 minutes then allow 15 minutes to steep and settle. Chill to about 68°F (20°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 72°F (22°C) until fully attenuated. Cool to 54°F (12°C) to condition for 1 week, then crash to 32°F (0°C) for 1 more week. Package and carbonate to 2.5–2.7 volumes of CO₂. (We bottle-condition this beer traditionally in half-liter bottles.)

BREWER'S NOTES

Water profile: Aim for around 2:1 calcium sulfate to calcium chloride.

Malt: If Maris Otter is unavailable, try to source the best British pale malt you can. Golden Promise or Chevallier would be excellent substitutions.

Hops: The same goes here—just source the best-quality, freshest British hops you can... although Willamette, Mount Hood, or Crystal would also work well. Note that we use a hopback for the whole-leaf; a hop spider should do the job at this scale.

Sugar: This beer gets much of its color (and some flavor) from invert sugar No. 2. You could instead use demerara or other dark cane sugar, but it's well worth getting hold of the real thing. (Or make your own—see "Zebulon's Mike Karnowski Shares Four Ways to Make Invert Sugar," beerandbrewing.com.)

Yeast: The dual pitch uses a British yeast for lots of fruity ester production, while we use WLP001 to help with attenuation. British yeasts love to sediment out and can be flocculent, in a troublesome sort of way.

BREWER'S PERSPECTIVE

Cape Town's Neverending Boil

A collaborative experiment between South African brewers led to a super-hefty barleywine of 17.5 percent ABV, via an unusual boiling process measured in days rather than hours. **By Lucy Corne**

TARGETS ARE OFTEN what drive brewers. When contemplating a new beer, for example, you might start from a desired ABV, color, or level of bitterness. With a desired flavor profile in mind, you select your malt, hops, and yeast, and you tweak your water.

Occasionally, however, brewers will turn that convention on its head—instead of chasing numbers and flavors, they just let the process decide.

“We didn’t set out with a specific outcome in mind,” says Jake Sandenbergh, head brewer at Afro Caribbean Brewing in Cape Town, South Africa. “For this beer, it was all about the process, and we decided to let the process drive the flavor.”

The beer in question began with a grain bill of 97 percent Maris Otter malt. It ended up rich and viscous, near-black in color, with complex flavors of licorice, treacle toffee, Christmas cake, and a sprinkling of soy sauce. Clocking in at 17.5 percent ABV, the beer owes its ponderous depth and complexity to a process of heating and boiling stretched out over several days.

Swapping Stories

It began with two brewers trading stories over pints.

Nick Smith, founder and brewer at the award-winning Soul Barrel in the Cape

Winelands, was reeling from a rough brew day—in mid-boil, a power outage had taken out his planned oatmeal stout. The wort sat in the kettle overnight; he eventually boiled it again, cooling and fermenting the beer to see how the extended kettle time would affect it.

Smith was recounting the story to Sandenbergh, who replied with his own tale of a boil that lasted longer than intended.

Sandenbergh’s first brewing job was in Johannesburg, just over a decade ago. The rudimentary brew kit at the small, startup nanobrewery turned brew days into marathon sessions, often carrying on into the evening. On one occasion, Sandenbergh had to head home mid-boil, leaving the brewery owner to finish the process. Arriving back at work the next day, however, he found the wort still sitting in the kettle—so, he fired it up to start the boil again.

“It turned out to be the best beer I’d ever made at that point,” Sandenbergh says. “We even took bottles to a local festival organizer, to ask if we could take a stand at his next event—and after sampling the beer, he accepted us.”

Smith’s story likewise ended up with a beer that surpassed expectations. So, the two hatched a plan.

“We began to talk scientifically about what was happening during this process,” says Smith, a graduate of the master brewer program at the University of California, Davis. “And then we thought, what if we really pushed it to the extreme? This is the kind of beer that definitely works best as a collab, since you’re exploring uncharted territory and trying new things. It really helps to have someone to bounce ideas around with.”

Much like the beer that would eventually follow, the idea marinated for a while—until one morning in September 2024, when the two locally respected brewers arrived at Afro Caribbean’s suburban brewpub to mash in on one of the most extreme beers either of them had attempted.

Their only real target: to achieve an evaporation rate of 50 percent. They set aside four days to boil the beer in various stages.

Boiling for Days

After mashing, Sandenbergh, Smith, and Afro Caribbean assistant brewer Jordan Hole began with a relatively standard two-hour boil, then they killed the heat.

They monitored the wort’s temperature: Whenever it dropped below 176°F (80°C), they’d fire up the gas burners and boil it again for another two or three hours, further developing the flavor and concentrating the wort. Maillard reactions took hold, gradually turning the wort from amber to brown to a tar-like black, as deeper and deeper levels of caramelized flavors developed.

In total, they actively boiled the wort for 20 hours. Sandenbergh estimates a further 20 hours of caramelization time as they repeatedly used the direct-fire brew-house to reheat the wort to boiling point.

“That’s part of the reason we didn’t just do it for 20 hours straight,” Sandenbergh says. “The extra caramelization from reheating definitely added a lot more depth to the beer.”

“Plus, of course,” Smith says, “doing it this way was part of the original story—part of the reason we got here in the first place.”

“We ordered a yeast that we thought would be capable of doing the job, but the yeast didn’t arrive on time, so we ended up carrying on the boil for six days while waiting for the delivery.”



MAKE IT

Opus Aeternum, the Neverending Boil

From South Africa's Afro Caribbean and Soul Barrel breweries, this hefty barleywine is based on a unique, experimental process—they kept the wort hot and boiled it for a total of 20 hours over six days. They achieved 50 percent evaporation before fermenting with a potent, enzyme-enriched yeast strain and aging in a second-use bourbon barrel.

ALL-GRAIN

Batch size: 5 gallons (19 liters)

Brewhouse efficiency: 72%

OG: 1.156 (35.4°P)

FG: 1.048 (12°P)

IBUs: 100+

ABV: 17.5%

MALT/GRAIN BILL

28 lb (12.7 kg) Maris Otter

14 oz (397 g) Simpsons DRC

HOPS SCHEDULE

3.5 oz (100 g) Columbus at 60 minutes

[100+ IBUs]

YEAST

Fermentis SafBrew DW-17

DIRECTIONS

Mill the grains and mash at 147°F (64°C) for 60 minutes. Recirculate until the runnings are clear, then run off into the kettle. Don't worry too much about the gravity—essentially, you're trying to fill a kettle with the highest-gravity wort your system can produce with a single mash. Boil the wort for two hours, then kill the heat. Over the course of six days, continue to boil periodically for 30 minutes at a time; the target is an evaporation rate of 50 percent. When not boiling, maintain the highest temperature possible—at least 176°F (80°C). Once the wort is down to a bit more than half its initial volume, add the hops and boil for 1 more hour. Chill to about 70°F (21°C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at 72°F (22°C), stepping up to 77°F (25°C) toward the end of fermentation. Once fermentation is complete, rack onto oak and age several months before bottling or using as a blending component.

BREWER'S NOTES

The idea behind doing this for an extended time is to maximize caramelization through extended contact with high temperatures—you won't get quite the same effect if you boil for 20 hours straight. The periodic boiling also helps to drive off oxygen and reduce staling. The hop addition depends on your final volume—we added about 5 g/liter, or roughly 0.7 oz per gallon.

A Challenging Fermentation

The original plan had been to conduct the boils over four days, assuming they'd achieved their target evaporation rate. However, issues in acquiring a suitable yeast strain added an extra two days to the process.

"We ordered a yeast that we thought would be capable of doing the job," Sandenbergh says, "but the yeast didn't arrive on time, so we ended up carrying on the boil for six days while waiting for the delivery."

When the yeast did arrive, a new problem arose: "We oxygenated and pitched," Sandenbergh says, "and nothing happened. Absolutely nothing."

"We didn't know how much complex sugar we had created," Smith says. "Had we created a wort that was actually unfer-

mentable? Did the yeast crap out because it was unhealthy or because there were no fermentable sugars left? Or did it crap out because of a lack of nutrients after such a lengthy boil?"

After a late scramble, they managed to buy a brick of Fermentis SafBrew DW-17, an enzyme-enriched yeast strain that's suited to super-high-gravity wort. That strain is phenolic off-flavor positive (POF+), but that character wasn't evident in the finished beer. (For more about POF+ yeast strains, see "Under the Microscope: 9 Fermentation Myths Debunked," brewingindustryguide.com.)

"We didn't realize it was a POF+ yeast, but in the end, this didn't affect the beer's flavor," Sandenbergh says. "Fermentation kicked off, and in just under two weeks we had a very clean beer finishing at 12° Plato [1.048]."

From Barrel to Bottle

They cold-conditioned the beer for a month before transporting it via keg to Soul Barrel, a 45-minute drive away. There it would spend the next year in a second-fill bourbon barrel. The brewers tasted the beer every few months to document its evolving flavor profile.

"It was very sweet at first," Smith says, "like molasses, which of course goes through a similar process. Then, as it aged, it picked up a lot of dried-fruit character, and it has really mellowed out. I think it'll probably age well in the bottle for a further 20 years or so."

They named the beer Opus Aeternum—eternal work. They filled 500 bottles of it to release in South Africa just in time for Christmas 2025. They're holding back some more bottles for aging, but that should be the end of it—they say they're unlikely to repeat the experiment.

"I'm really happy with the beer, but I wouldn't repeat this exact process," Sandenbergh says. "But I would consider doing another beer with a 50 percent evaporation rate, to keep aside for blending. It has a very distinct, deep flavor, and I'd love to have 10 kegs sitting in the cold room to play around with."

In the end, the beer is a testament to innovation—and to the resilience of South Africans in general, taking inspiration from a moment of adversity and transforming it into something rare and wonderful.





Tasted

Stouts and **Porters** form the core of this issue's review focus, in all their **flavored, barrel-aged, imperial,** and **sweet** expressions, along with **British-style** ales, and more...

INSIDE CB&B

How We Taste & Test

Reviewing beer may sound like a dream job, but our tasting and review panel takes the role seriously. Composed of professional brewers, certified Cicerones, and Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP) judges who have all studied, trained, and been tested on their ability to discern characteristics in beer, our panel is independent and diverse. The panel tastes all beer blindly—they do not know what brands and beers they are tasting until the tasting is complete.

Our goal is to inform you about the strengths and weaknesses of these beers as well as their relative differences (not everyone has the same taste in beer, so accurate descriptors are more valuable than straight numerical values). The quotes you see are compiled from the review panel's score sheets to give you a well-rounded picture of the beer. To add to that snapshot, we also include a brief review from an editor, although that editor's input does not impact the score.

As our reviewers judge, they score based on the standard BJCP components: Aroma (max 12 points), Appearance (max 3 points), Flavor (max 20 points), Mouthfeel (max 5 points), and Overall Impression (max 10 points). We've listed these individual component scores, and the bottom-line number is derived from adding then doubling these component scores to produce a rating on a 100-point scale. Note that the component scores are rounded automatically to the next whole number, so numbers here may appear to not add correctly. Rest assured that the score calculation is built off the numbers before rounding.

Our judges use the following scale in valuing scores:

95–100 » Extraordinary
World-class beers of superlative character and flawless execution

90–94 » Exceptional
Distinguished beers with special character, style, and flavor

85–89 » Very good
Well-crafted beers with noteworthy flavor and style

80–84 » Good

Keep one thing in mind as you read these reviews—your perception of a beer is more important than that of our review panel or editorial staff, and reading reviews in a magazine (or online or in a book) is no substitute for trying the beer yourself.

TASTED: BRITISH-STYLE ALES



Corn Coast Windsurfing on the Thames

98 AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:
"2025 GABF Gold Medal Winner for ES. Brewed with 100 percent English malt, hops, and yeast."

What our reviewers thought:
"Beautifully clear, deep amber color with a solid, creamy off-white head. Toasty bread with a hint of caramel on the nose along with wonderful festive plum. Fruit is predominant; awesome cherry cordial, low toast, marshmallow creaminess. Moderate body but still a crusher."

What our editors thought:
"A persistent lacy head gives way to bold hop bitterness supported by caramel and toffee in a rich, bready core. Well layered and quietly complex, with light pear, apple, and floral honeydew esters."
ABV: 5.3% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Lincoln, NE

Brother Chimp Bonobo Nut Brown Ale

86 AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 8

What the brewer says:
"Malt-forward, English-style nut brown ale with a warm character of hazelnut, biscuit, and toffee notes."
What our reviewers thought:
"The aroma is like toasted brown bread, with light caramel and some estery notes. Background hop aroma is earthy. An impression of minerality adds a drying effect. Sweet, with flavors of ribbon candy and red apple. Moderately bitter, sweet finish."

What our editors thought:
"A subtle aroma opens into a thin, delicate body where malt sweetness leads over bitterness. Flavors of milk-chocolate chips folded into dark bread linger gently long after the finish."
ABV: 5.4% **IBUs:** 20
Loc: North Aurora, IL



Firestone Walker DBA

93 AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:
"Our original barrel-fermented ale, rooted in English tradition and crafted with unwavering respect for heritage."
What our reviewers thought:
"Bright, intriguing nose: delicately floral with a candy-like note. Very balanced with a touch of caramel. Light, lemony hops flavor; smooth, unassuming bitterness with a nutty malt base and a soft, slightly fruity sweetness."

What our editors thought:
"Quietly refined, with bitterness well integrated into a structured frame. Oak and subtle vanilla support a finish that's dry yet still carried by malt sweetness, revealing more depth than the appearance suggests."
ABV: 5% **IBUs:** 30
Loc: Paso Robles, CA



Derive Lost Leatherman

95 AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:
"English dark mild brewed with a combination of specialty grains and East Kent Golding hops."
What our reviewers thought:
"Easy-drinking, smooth ale with chocolate notes throughout. Hits the low-session, pleasantly watery feel of a true mild. Clean malt and light fig are subdued and subtle and don't overwhelm the nose with fruit. Well crafted, simple, and good."

What our editors thought:
"Dark, roasted malt on the nose gives way to toffee, ground coffee, and milk chocolate. A round mouthfeel emphasizes a balance between sweetness and malt bitterness, finishing dry."
ABV: 3.8% **IBUs:** 10
Loc: Columbus, OH



Ghost Hawk Shropshire Lad

85 AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:
"English pale and crystal malts lend biscuity flavors. Willamette hops complement the malty flavors."
What our reviewers thought:
"Lightly fruity pear and red-apple esters greet the nose with notes of orange peel and pine throughout. Clean, crisp malt body. Honey and toast malts with a bit of sweetness dominate the taste. Hops offer pleasant herbal-lavender kick."

What our editors thought:
"Malt-forward with English hops that shine through without over-reaching. Caramel, toffee, and bready sweetness persist, with a noted mid-palate minerality and a softly sweet finish."
ABV: 5.4% **IBUs:** 33
Loc: Clifton, NJ



REVIEW PHOTOS: PAUL HUTCHINGS AND JAMIE BOGNER

Odyssey Beerwerks Clan Warrior

90

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Big and bold Scotch ale with notes of toffee, caramel, and a touch of peat smoke.”

What our reviewers thought: “Smoke adjunct provides a meaty, ham-like aroma. Flavor is balanced, smoke is mild. Sweet rich malt character with some smoke coming forward. Light bacon soaked in a plum-fig sauce. Rich finish with more dark-fruit notes.”

What our editors thought: “Smoke leads the nose, pairing cleanly with underlying sweetness. The sip moves from sweet to bitter and back to smoke, leaving impressions of burnt-sugar caramel and coffee.”

ABV: 10.1% **IBUs:** 30
Loc: Arvada, CO



Solemn Oath Hippo Trout

85

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Notes of toasted bread, caramel, and earthy hops.”

What our reviewers thought: “Light nutty-malt notes in the aroma, followed by soft malt flavors. A touch of roast adds complexity. Bitter chocolate and darker-fruit notes on the tongue. Pleasant ester character adds to the fruity impression.”

What our editors thought: “Initial sip is a sharp yet subtle roast. A lean, malt-forward profile follows with light toast and perceived nuttiness, finishing dry, with delicate bitterness.”

ABV: 3.6% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Naperville, IL



Strange Days Tekkers

94

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “A classic take on an English mild using mostly Golden Promise and flaked oats.”

What our reviewers thought: “Aroma is punching above its weight. Rich, luscious, toasty caramel and a hint of toffee, even something reminiscent of Tootsie Pops. Drinks light and spritzy, with a body that’s pleasantly bready and drinkable. Decent, satisfying, and refreshing.”

What our editors thought: “A restrained nose hints at light tobacco and cocoa. Thin-bodied but malt-driven, with fruit-tinged coffee notes and a bread-crust dryness.”

ABV: 3.8% **IBUs:** 20
Loc: Kansas City, MO



Triptych Proper Brown Ale

90

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Warm, toasty depth with gentle, balanced bitterness.”

What our reviewers thought: “Aroma shows medium-sweet malt, caramel, and toasted dark-bread notes. Hop aroma is medium, woody or spicy. Fruit esters of pear or berry. Flavor is initially sweet malt with a caramel-candy quality, followed by a lingering hop bitterness. A tea-like bitterness persists through the finish.”

What our editors thought: “Light roast aromatics open into red-apple and nut-forward notes. A dense biscuit-malt backbone carries milk chocolate and earthy tones, with ground coffee bitterness edging in on the finish.”

ABV: 5% **IBUs:** 10
Loc: Savoy, IL



Our Mutual Friend On and On

87

AROMA: 9
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Pub ale brewed with 100 percent Colorado malt and hops.”

What our reviewers thought: “On the nose, there’s perfumy orange and a bit of marmalade, with some nutty corn and popcorn in the aroma—reminiscent of Corn Nuts and malt chaff. The bitterness is moderate and pleasant, along with a pleasant doughy flavor.”

What our editors thought: “Honey and caramel aromatics are present in a golden beer. Light and refreshing, with moderate orange bitterness and a restrained malt base.”

ABV: 4.6% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Denver



Strange Days Splendid Defending

94

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “English-style brown ale that won gold at GABF 2025.”

What our reviewers thought: “Caramel and roasted-malt aromas are well integrated. Some light, woody hops in the background, with subtle berry esters. Rich flavor is medium-sweet, with notes of toasted bread, caramel, and ribbon candy. Hop bitterness balances but doesn’t intrude. Finish is smooth, with a lingering malt-cereal impression.”

What our editors thought: “Bread and toffee on the nose interlace with intriguing floral and grassy notes. Toast, moderate bitterness, and pecan-like character. Finishes dry with light malt sweetness.”

ABV: 4.5% **IBUs:** 25
Loc: Kansas City, MO



Triptych Luke’s Still Here, Man

90

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 2
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Strong Scottish-style ale with aromatic notes of cherry and caramel. Finish is a balance of sweet caramel and a wee bit of bitterness.”

What our reviewers thought: “Light biscuit nose with some caramel. Rich and malt-forward on the palate, with caramel malt notes, plum, raisin, and fig. Light body structure. Sweet finish.”

What our editors thought: “Caramel-brown and deeply expressive, showing rich caramel and toffee-pudding sweetness. A rounded mouthfeel carries dried fruit and light toast, adding further complexity and a warming finish.”

ABV: 8.6% **IBUs:** 20
Loc: Savoy, IL



Urbanrest English Dark Mild

88

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 2
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Made with Maris Otter and carefully placed specialty malts.”

What our reviewers thought: “Rich, sweet caramel aroma, almost into bock territory. Light earthy or woody hop aroma. Some dark-fruit esters—fig or raisin. Flavor is likewise caramel and rich, toasted sweet malt balanced by medium hop bitterness. Malt-forward with solid pub vibes.”

What our editors thought: “Brown in color with a residual tan head and a subtle aroma. Light-bodied, with fruity esters hinting at pome fruit, finishing gently sweet.”

ABV: 4.3% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Ferndale, MI



TASTED: BARLEYWINE



Sunriver Wood Series: Bourbon Barrel Barleywine 2025

100

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Classic American barleywine aged in eight-year-old Kentucky bourbon barrels. Conditioned on oak for 12 months. Deep amber hue. Notes of orange blossom, caramel candies, cherry cordials, and vanilla creamsicles."

What our reviewers thought:

"Floral aroma with hints of rose blossom, cherry, and fig. The first sip offers some delicate toast and honey with a bit of balancing astringency. Medium-high fruity and woody hops blend with apricot and cherry esters and toffee-caramel malt. Light coconut adds depth. Not overly sweet. Spicy alcohol. Really nice carbonation and body. Really refreshing!"

What our editors thought:

"Gentle American hops drive the nose along with full malt notes that aren't quite caramel, as an herbal freshness amplifies the contours. Firmly bitter in the flavor, rounded with an effortlessly smooth balance among hops, malt, and barrel. American at its core, with a thoughtful confidence."

ABV: 12.7% IBUs: 60
Loc: Sunriver, OR

American Solera Barleyfest 2025

95

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Aged 52 months in Blanton's barrels."

What our reviewers thought:

"Leathery and rich. Significant but velvety-smooth alcohol, with layers of dried cherries, nutty nougat, bourbon, oak, and caramel malt. Vanilla provides additional complexity. Finish has a deep burnt-sugar overtone with toffee notes."

What our editors thought:

"Deep charred-oak notes in the aroma with bitter chocolate and just a hint of red berry. Almond butter richness in the flavor is honed by the lower sweetness and stronger chocolate notes. Full yet punchy and succinct."

ABV: 14% IBUs: N/A
Loc: Tulsa, OK



Central Standard Liquid Art

98

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Blend from a Heaven Hill bourbon barrel and a former Starlight bourbon barrel that had recently housed Huber Blackberry Wine."

What our reviewers thought:

"Spicy, floral alcohol nose. Heavy prune and dates with figs, cherries. Light cinnamon-nutmeg. Flavor has dark chocolate notes with maple and smoke. Mouthfeel is bold without being syrupy. Nice bitterness to the finish."

What our editors thought:

"Vinous aroma with woody back notes and a general caramel baseline. Spunky and scrappy in the flavor, as caramel plays against a tannic note without much sweetness. Bold and unyielding."

ABV: 12.5% IBUs: 30
Loc: Wichita, KS



Creature Comforts The Tree That Owns Itself

88

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"English-style barleywine. Fruity, rich, decadent, with rich caramel, molasses, toffee, and brown sugar notes."

What our reviewers thought:

"Hazy with low head, as expected for the style. Fruity, boozy nose that carries into the flavor. Distracting vegetal note. Super chewy. An excellent example of the style."

What our editors thought:

"Zucchini and green-flower aroma feels a bit out of place. Tighter, off-dry body with strong dry-wood notes in the flavor."

ABV: 13% IBUs: N/A
Loc: Athens, GA



Bissell Brothers Mirroring Dimensions

93

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Barrel-aged ryewine. Notes of stewed stone fruit, tobacco, and spice."

What our reviewers thought:

"Refined leather and charred oak with sweeter vanilla in the aroma. Concise and brooding in the flavor, structured despite the sweetness. Satisfying with a remarkable drinkability. Cloudy and almost pétillant. Hides its ABV very well—it's not hot at all."

What our editors thought:

"Smoked brisket and chocolate caramel sundae in the nose, settling into a chocolate flavor with a bit of dry tannic spiciness. Beautiful silky texture."

ABV: 14.3% IBUs: N/A
Loc: Portland, ME



Cerebral Celestial Origin: Willett Rye

85

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 2
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 8

What the brewer says:

"Aged 22 months in a single Willett Rye whiskey barrel."

What our reviewers thought:

"Medium-dark malt, chocolate, with some faint umami alongside rich and complex prune and figs. Toffee malt with prunes, dark cherries, figs, soft rye whiskey, and a slight spiciness."

What our editors thought:

"Broiled sugar on toast in the aroma, with a touch of brown butter that becomes more prominent in the flavor. Caramel midtones saturate without lower-frequency bitterness to balance."

ABV: 14.4% IBUs: N/A
Loc: Denver



Eagle Park Fuzz Lord

98

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Aged in bourbon barrels for three years, then aged another year in peach-brandy barrels."

What our reviewers thought:

"Small yet delectable, delicious boozy peach background overlaid with thick barley in the nose. Just-perceptible notes of leather and soy sauce complement the rich malt flavors and alcohol. Boozy intensity, warming barrel character, and chocolate—all well-integrated."

What our editors thought:

"Bold new-school aroma with a curious blend of hops and stone fruit backed by an almost vintage depth. Sweet and full in the flavor yet balanced, with pointed chocolate notes softened by just a bit of stroopwafel."

ABV: 17.2% IBUs: N/A
Loc: Milwaukee



Ever Grain Old Evil

96

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"A blend of bourbon and cognac barrel-aged barleywine."

What our reviewers thought:

"Bourbon notes with delightful dark and candied fruits and blackberry on the aroma. Flavor has some chocolate-cake notes, red grapes, with a bit of hazelnut. Vinous cognac character. Nice balance of sweetness with alcohol and a satisfying astringent finish."

What our editors thought:

"Strong layered caramel notes in the aroma with just a bit of stone fruit and oak tannin. Peach cobbler and caramelized sugar in the flavor, with a tangy backing spice that keeps it from being cloying."

ABV: 15% **IBUs:** 25
Loc: Camp Hill, PA



Good Land Midnight Shift

85

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 8

What the brewer says:

"Starward Whisky barrel-aged dark barleywine."

What our reviewers thought:

"In the aroma, malt leans into spicy alcohol, barrel-derived bourbon, cinnamon spice, and caramel sweet sugar richness. Raisin-forward malt. Touch of dried plum and red-apple skin. Lemony and white-pepper flavor up front dissolves into bourbon and alcohol. Buttery wood lactones in the background."

What our editors thought:

"Playful citrus floral note in the aroma with a baseline breadiness. Hop bitterness is more assertive in the flavor, with just enough supporting malt."

ABV: 12.2% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Traralgon East, Victoria, Australia



Kros Strain Grand Cru #2

89

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Blend of barrel-aged English barleywine and barrel-aged imperial stout. Notes of coffee, chocolate, caramel, or toffee."

What our reviewers thought:

"Big chocolate aromas with a hint of soy sauce. Sweet, malty flavor, with a level of alcohol that lightens the perceived body. Well-balanced flavors. Fairly potent alcohol, but not overly hot. Nice esters with a subtle spiciness."

What our editors thought:

"Chocolate and whiskey in the nose with some deeper syrah-barrel notes. Lighter in the sip as the deeper notes fade and the caramel middle pushes forward. Enjoyable, yet simple."

ABV: 13% **IBUs:** 40
Loc: LaVista, NE



Little Brother King in the Castle

98

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Malty British deliciousness."

What our reviewers thought:

"Aromas of red fruit, freshly caramelized and baked in a pie. Also some notes of red licorice and rye malt. Drying alcohol character with lingering candied fruit. Flavor has satisfying astringency to balance the fruity character. Very easy beer to drink, despite the ABV."

What our editors thought:

"Strong citrus aroma with a bit of light herbal hops. Firm in the flavor with a deep finesse, as it finds the smooth bitterness to support the strength, with the semblance of dryness despite the body and heft. Sophisticated in its simplicity."

ABV: 9.1% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Greensboro, NC



Fonta Flora Birthdaywine 12

97

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Double barrel-aged in bourbon and Carlisle wine barrels."

What our reviewers thought:

"Wine, chocolate, and wood on the aroma, with notes of sweet vanilla and red licorice. Heavy rich caramel, toffee, and warm rustic-bread malt with spicy bourbon and vinous wine character."

What our editors thought: "American hop notes play against caramel and chocolate in the nose, dialed back into a subtle interplay that stretches into the flavor, underpinned by a smooth but firm hop bitterness."

ABV: 12% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Nebo, NC



Highland Park Day in Life

96

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: "Spirit, fig jam, date shake, and port on the nose. Flavors of toffee and crème brûlée. Restrained sweetness."

What our reviewers thought:

"Nice dark vinous note on the nose with notes of caramel, peanut brittle, and molasses praline. Juicy and coating in the flavor, with a dark-chocolate note behind that holds it together."

What our editors thought: "Light aroma with subtle nutty and caramel tones. Similarly light flavor, despite the strength, with a refined nimble body, light cooked-sugar note, and just a hint of wood tannin to balance."

ABV: 13.7% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Los Angeles



Kros Strain Triple Barrel Bung Buddies

92

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: "Aged in Hemingway Papa's Pilar Rum and Blis Maple Syrup bourbon barrels. Notes of toffee, cola, fig, rum, maple."

What our reviewers thought:

"Leather and pumpnickel crust in the aroma with a bit of charred barrel, maple, dark fruit, and vanilla. Sweet but dark in the flavor, with bold boozy chocolate notes and vanilla highlights in a bourbon wash. Super sweet. A tasty drop in moderation."

What our editors thought:

"Musty barrel and dried dark fruit in the aroma. A marshmallow-like plum sweetness hits first in the flavor, balanced by oak tannins and a medium-bitter chocolate."

ABV: 15.5% **IBUs:** 40
Loc: LaVista, NE



Lumberbeard Anniversary Year 5

91

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Blend of one-, two-, three-, and four-year-old barleywine aged in Willett bourbon barrels."

What our reviewers thought:

"Burnt caramelized sugar, spirit-soaked. Rich, layered, complex malt and oak profile. Great umami-rich depth. Velvety smooth alcohol throws pleasant floral notes with vanilla accents. Alcohol is smooth and beguiling. Solid caramel. The bourbon is well done at a modest background level that adds complexity."

What our editors thought:

"Shortbread aroma with a bit of whiskey behind it. Down-the-middle caramel flavor with low bitterness and a bit of peanut-brittle fullness."

ABV: 15.8% **IBUs:** 75
Loc: Spokane, WA



Lumberbeard Artistic Trajectory

92

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “Blended of whiskey barrel-aged barleywine bases aged for at least 36 months.”

What our reviewers thought: “Rich caramel malt, smooth alcohol, and pleasant hints of vanilla, treacle, whiskey, and spicy barrel. Oak with a moderate char provides balancing tannins and peppery spice with a touch of cinnamon. Nothing fancy about this blue-collar barleywine, as it delivers malt, alcohol, bourbon, barrel, and a buzz. Well-executed.”

What our editors thought: “Expected vanilla and general whiskey aroma notes alongside fig and plum, with charred oak undertones. Fruit-forward and full without losing its precision in the flavor.”

ABV: 14.8% **IBUs:** 55
Loc: Spokane, WA



pFriem 2025 Vermouth BA Rye Imperial Brown

96

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “Aged in sweet red vermouth barrels. Herbaceous notes of rich toffee and dried fig.”

What our reviewers thought: “Big chocolate and fudgy aromas up front followed by sherry and almond shells. Rich gourmand flavor with sherry and fudge. Very sweet with a tannic bitterness and background spicy note. Brown-ale base shows up in a medium-sweet, toasted malt background.”

What our editors thought: “Fresh minty aroma with some woodier malt notes. Dry but expressive in the flavor, herbal yet refined, with a light body and confident presentation despite the unexpected flavor.”

ABV: 11.4% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Hood River, OR



Roughtail Sacred Talisman

89

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Aged in Widow Jane barrels for 24 months.”

What our reviewers thought: “The aroma brings deeper boozy bourbon with a woody front-note, dark fruit, and bits of marzipan. The sip pushes forward quickly, with boozy, nutty, raisin notes, then it quickly drops into a chocolatey, bitter finish.”

What our editors thought: “Strawberry-peach aroma with woody undertones and a fresh herbal top note. Woody in the sip, with a spicy tannic bite that easily balances the middle caramel tones.”

ABV: 14.5% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Oklahoma City



Wandering Monsters Captain Kidd

90

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Imperial brown ale aged in peach-brandy barrels.”

What our reviewers thought: “Chocolate and fudge aromas well matched with ripe peach and brandy. Flavors of cooked peaches poured over chocolate cake with a sip of brandy. Very delicious, very approachable, and very complex.”

What our editors thought: “Very strong peach notes in the aroma with a clinical edge, and a bit of sugar-coated cobbler crust. Semisweet and breadly in the sip, slightly tart, with a vague herbal bitterness.”

ABV: 12.6% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Cincinnati



Noble Beast We Don't Rat, We Don't Run 2025

86

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 8

What the brewer says: “Blended solera-style and continuously foeder-aged. Rich, complex, and unique.”

What our reviewers thought: “Caramel, dark-fruit aroma. Sweet caramel and dark fruit continue into the flavor. Sweet in the sip, with a strong ethanol edge that amplifies the sugary malt. Smooth mouthfeel. A tasty drop, in moderation.”

What our editors thought: “Balsamic notes with some cellar must, peach brandy, and chocolate liqueur in the aroma. Sweeter in the flavor, as the balsamic notes amplify the dark fruit with a bit of tangy tannin reining it in.”

ABV: 14.3% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Cleveland



Phase Three Arabesque Reserve (2025)

93

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Layers of fig syrup, tobacco, and warm bourbon tones over vanilla and deep wood character.”

What our reviewers thought: “Strong dark-chocolate aroma with boozy barrel character, raisins and figs. Deep burnt-caramel notes in the flavor, with a cutting chocolate-liqueur edge and a bit of coffee on the back. Super-sweet and viscous.”

What our editors thought: “Refined dark caramel and chocolate aroma with a bit of licorice edge. Softer in the sip with a woody dark caramel note, incredibly smooth, with hints of toffee and almond baking spice.”

ABV: 14.9% **IBUs:** 35
Loc: Lake Zurich, IL



Toppling Goliath Meteora

89

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Hints of sweet molasses, brown sugar, pinwheel date cookies, light raisin, and caramel-chocolate candies.”

What our reviewers thought: “Silky warm charred oak, dark fruit, and sherry on the nose. Flavor brings dark fruit, soy sauce, spicy cinnamon, a bit of burnt honey. Incredibly drinkable, repeatable. Intensely rich and sweet, brimming with caramel bonbons.”

What our editors thought: “Caramel-latte aroma with some spicy Turkish coffee undertones. Nutty coffee notes in the flavor with a strong vanilla and almond sweetness.”

ABV: 11% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Decorah, IA



Westbound & Down Louie Louie

97

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “Aged in a Heaven Hill barrel and finished in a Black Maple Hill barrel.”

What our reviewers thought: “On the nose, some fruit esters and a prominent licorice note. Medium salted caramel with dates, figs, and candied fruitcake morsels on top of a toffee, nutty, and toasted biscuit-malt backbone. Sweet, but spicy alcohol and rich candied fruit provide balance and depth.”

What our editors thought: “Red licorice, crisp caramel, and a bit of apple skin in the nose. Tight and refined in the flavor, with layered sweet caramel playing against burnt bread crust and deep alligator-charred oak. Full but balanced.”

ABV: 13.9% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Lafayette, CO





Fonta Flora Somewhere, Someday

98

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Barleywine-style ale aged in bourbon barrels and conditioned on toasted fig wood, toasted coconut, and vanilla."

What our reviewers thought:

"A punch to the nose of intense malt with dark red fruit. Sexy oxidation provides a fine layer of sherry. Vanilla complements the barrel well. Deeply intense flavor with layers of rich caramel, coconut, vanilla, and sweet alcohol wrapped in a comforting blanket of bourbon."

What our editors thought:

"Big woody and cellar-must notes in the aroma with a bit of plum, raisin, Pickapeppa sauce, coconut, and cabernet sauvignon. Initially sweet in the flavor as the lower carb pushes the malt forward, but the dark-fruit notes quickly subside, leaving layers of caramel and toffee underpinned by oak char and burnt bread-crust bitterness, smoothed over with vanilla and coconut top-notes. Flavors and aromas meld seamlessly."

ABV: 12% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Nebo, NC

Arizona Wilderness Genesis of Things

90

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Lactose barleywine aged in Australian rum barrels with a kiss of vanilla beans."

What our reviewers thought:

"Rum tickles the nose and follows in the flavor. Light in body, retaining layers of complementary flavors of rum, malt, caramel, and vanilla. As it warms, spicy oak provides an interesting background note."

What our editors thought:

"Soft peach, port wine, and oak with a sculpted fruity edge in the aroma. Sugar-cookie malt with molasses glaze in the flavor as lower carbonation highlights the sweetness, but it pulls together in the finish with a light leathery bite."

ABV: 11.1% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Gilbert, AZ



Forgotten Road February Drill Maple Leaf 2025

90

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Drinks sweet with a punch of maple and a dab of cinnamon."

What our reviewers thought:

"Sweet cherry and maple syrup with cinnamon greet the nose, along with fruity sweet caramel and spicy alcohol. In the flavor, that spicy alcohol complements the rich layers of caramel, dried cherry, and maple syrup. Warming cinnamon character."

What our editors thought:

"Cinnamon roll and maple syrup on pancakes heavily saturate the aroma, and the expected sweetness delivers in the flavor, with a curious mango and mango-skin note, and a bit of dry wooden barrel. Finishes with a bit of pithy astringency balancing the lingering sugar."

ABV: 12% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Graham, NC



Jukes Speak to the Trees V.2

90

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Aged in apple-brandy barrels, finished on candy cap mushrooms, barrel-aged maple syrup, cinnamon, vanilla beans, sugar-maple staves, nutmeg."

What our reviewers thought:

"Super maple, raisin, and barrel character on the nose. Same in the flavor. Viscous body. Sweet yet deep in the flavor with a woody undertone and apple-brandy notes retronasal."

What our editors thought:

"Chocolate with a bit of Indian curry in the aroma, and a touch of maple. Full in the flavor with a hefty sweetness rounded by the earthy and drying spice."

ABV: 13.2% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Elkhorn, NE



BKS Recollection (2/15/25)

89

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Barleywine aged in bourbon barrels and conditioned on coffee."

What our reviewers thought:

"Evident spirit character and subtle coffee on the nose, with notes of maplewood, dark red fruits, and woodstove smoke. Sweet caramel, chocolate, and coffee flavor is balanced with some alcohol burn."

What our editors thought:

"Piñon coffee in the nose with nutty and caramel midtones and a defining woody chocolate edge. Bold chocolate and butterscotch candy in the sip, mouth-coating, with a refined bitter coffee finish."

ABV: 16% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Kansas City, MO



Good Land A Deal for Good

93

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Blend of four big barrel-aged beers and an imperial eisbock stout."

What our reviewers thought:

"Super-chocolate and vanilla nose with a bit of coconut, marshmallow, and candy-covered almonds. Super-chocolatey-vanilla flavor. The barrel is in the background but present."

What our editors thought:

"Chocolate graham cracker in the aroma, slightly nutty, with light floral vanilla high notes. Evocative in the flavor with bits of cinnamon spice, milk-chocolate syrup over vanilla ice cream with caramel sauce, topped with toasted nuts. Finishes coherently with a bit of lightly bitter chocolate."

ABV: 14.8% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Traralgon East, Victoria, Australia



Jukes Turning Wheel

85

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 2
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 3
OVERALL: 8

What the brewer says:

"English-style barleywine brewed with Belgian candi syrup, aged in bourbon barrels."

What our reviewers thought:

"Chocolate aroma with toffee, molasses notes and reduced figs. Thick toffee syrup without the cloying sweetness, but still boldly sweet. A port-wine note offers some dark-fruit complexity, but ultimately needs balance."

What our editors thought:

"Dark barleywine with silky but not syrupy texture. A bit of balsamic leads in the aroma with dark fruit underneath. Sweeter milk chocolate notes drive the flavor, broad and unfocused."

ABV: 13.6% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Elkhorn, NE



Maplewood BA Barley Butcher—Vanilla + Cinn.

92

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “A rye-barrel barleywine infused with vanilla and cinnamon.”

What our reviewers thought: “Strong cinnamon aroma with some fruity and floral top-notes, for an almost berry-and-peach-cobbler nose. In the sip, the spice astringency cuts through and dries the body like a cocktail bitter.”

What our editors thought: “Cinnamon graham cracker aroma with an almost brandy-like vinous grape note. Spice dries the flavor, pushing dark chocolate forward with just enough sweetness in the lingering finish. Strikes a difficult balance with the intensity of the cinnamon.”

ABV: 13% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Chicago



Cape May Mexican Coffee Stout

98

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

“Conditioned on fresh, locally roasted coffee, cinnamon, guajillo peppers, and vanilla. Perfectly balanced among the coffee, spice, and rich stout base.”

What our reviewers thought:

“On the nose, a pleasant hit of cinnamon and chile peppers layered over a chocolate coffee base. Flavor is balanced among all the facets: The chile-pepper flavor mingles with the chocolate without being hot, the cinnamon adds a zing, the coffee is kept in check. Rich, well balanced in adjunct flavor, it’s sweet but not cloying. Very fun!”

What our editors thought:

“Smooth, earthy cinnamon note in the aroma with firm chocolate biscuit, a bit of fresh rosemary, and echoes of light grapefruit peel. Semidry, with a lighter stout body that still manages to balance the drying spice without the peppers stealing the show. Beautifully balanced and eminently drinkable.”

ABV: 7.5% **IBUs:** 50
Loc: Cape May, NJ



The Big Friendly Choc. Peanut Butter Monster

91

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Imperial milk stout with roasted peanuts, cacao nibs, and a hint of sea salt.”

What our reviewers thought: “This is a peanut beer. Not peanut butter. Peanuts—from the huge peanut-shell aroma to the taste similarly dominated by peanuts with baker’s chocolate, earthy cacao, and salt.”

What our editors thought: “Decadent and assertive, led by a whole-peanut character that evokes both the nut and shell. Baby Ruth candy-bar sweetness and rich toffee unfold mid-palate, with sea salt providing balance and added complexity.”

ABV: 12% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Oklahoma City



Discourse Java Abyss

91

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “Pastry stout with Guatemalan coffee.”

What our reviewers thought:

“Roasted coffee hits the nose first. The lactose backbone of the milk stout hits the mouth with a smoothness like creamer in your coffee, but the robustness of the coffee sticks around. A touch sweet, but it’s a milk stout. Definitely for coffee lovers.”

What our editors thought:

“Creamy and indulgent, with milk chocolate and rounded edges on the palate. Reminiscent of Cadbury Creme Eggs. The initial sweetness gives way to floral coffee notes that fade into a smooth, confectionary finish.”

ABV: 7.9% **IBUs:** 18
Loc: Overland Park, KS



Urbanrest Marshmallow Barleywine

91

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “Sweet, sticky barleywine conditioned on gooey marshmallows.”

What our reviewers thought:

“Dark honey and treacle as the ‘marshmallow’ character comes through, with rich vanilla. Complex and inviting cherry, strawberry, caramel, and burnt vanilla flavors. A solid bitterness backs up the alcohol; vanilla notes bring everything together.”

What our editors thought: “Melted marshmallow on graham cracker in the aroma with subtle grilled peaches. Tighter breadly caramel in the flavor with a light ethanol edge and a punchy tannic husk finish.”

ABV: 11% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Ferndale, MI



Black Spruce Pistachio Thumbprint

93

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Imperial stout aged on pistachios, cacao nibs and vanilla beans.”

What our reviewers thought:

“Bold, nutty, and sweet. Rich fudge-like nuttiness with a large dose of sugar-cookie aromatics. Flavor enhances the nose to an even further degree, with decadent, gooey, chocolate brownie mix supplemented by vanilla and nuts. Dessert in a glass, with the heat well hidden. Sexy!”

What our editors thought:

“Nutty aromatics and spice lead into a velvety, pistachio-forward body. Soft marshmallow flavors help to cushion the overall bitterness, keeping the beer well-rounded and approachable.”

ABV: 9.8% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Fairbanks, AK



Guggman Haus Alpine Shadows

87

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Bold coffee aroma with background notes of vanilla and cinnamon.”

What our reviewers thought:

“Sweet nuts, coffee, and cinnamon on the nose. The oatmeal lends smoothness to the mouthfeel—like creamer for the coffee. Vanilla comes out as it warms, providing apparent sweetness. Fresh, bold flavors. Great breakfast beer!”

What our editors thought:

“Ground coffee, cinnamon, and nutmeg set the stage for a full, silken mouthfeel. Baking spices carry on through the finish, as blueberry, vanilla, and a touch of lime zest brighten the overall experience.”

ABV: 7.6% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Indianapolis



Helper Beer Night Indoors

88

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Silky-smooth mouthfeel. Notes of cacao, toffee, toasted sugar cookie, molasses, and dark red cherry."

What our reviewers thought:

"Ample fruity esters on the nose, plus licorice, brown sugar, Heath bar, and light coffee. Rich palate, with a vinous character resembling cabernet sauvignon. Black currant, licorice, sweet fruit esters. Sweet and hot finish with lingering chocolate and a pleasing bitterness."

What our editors thought:

"Fruity esters lift the aroma, while assertive bitterness and coffee define the palate. Notes of cocoa powder, toffee, and orange peel trail into a dry, pleasant finish."

ABV: 12% **IBUs:** 33
Loc: Helper, UT



pFriem Mexican-Style Chocolate Stout

85

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Creamy stout base with cinnamon, nutmeg, and pasilla chiles."

What our reviewers thought:

"Aroma is a whirlpool of nutmeg and savory stout character. The flavor starts with a punch of nutmeg that leads into a slightly sharp pepper heat accented by the cinnamon. An almond-like depth comes into play as it warms."

What our editors thought:

"Spicy, fresh-cut pepper aromatics open the nose, followed by a deep but measured heat that builds with time. Nutmeg, raisin, dark fruit, and a hint of cinnamon carry through on a lighter body."

ABV: 8.1% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Hood River, OR



Templin Family Delmar Imperial Stout

87

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Deep roasted malts, with a semidry bittersweet finish."

What our reviewers thought:

"Faint notes of licorice and citrus on the mild nose. Sweet notes on the palate, with raisin, dates, and figs dripping with melted brown sugar. A balance among roast, toast, and cocoa powder. Lingering citrus-hop flavors intertwine toward the back end. Bitter finish with sweet malts in the aftertaste."

What our editors thought:

"Dry and sharply roasty on the nose, with walnut and almond undertones. A touch of heat carries a lean body into a highly attenuated finish, accented by a hint of anise."

ABV: 11.5% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Salt Lake City



Wallenpaupack Santo Molé

85

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Fermented on toasted oak chips, conditioned on cocoa nibs, cinnamon, ancho, and de árbol peppers."

What our reviewers thought:

"Ancho chile dominates the aroma while in the flavor, cinnamon and oak join the choir. A smooth but noticeable heat fades slowly. The chiles add nice heat without overwhelming. Would love to see a bit more body and chewiness."

What our editors thought:

"Semisweet chocolate and cinnamon open the soft, restrained aroma. The initial sip is light and dry, with an unassuming black-pepper spice that is aromatically subtle but unmistakable on the finish."

ABV: 9% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Hawley, PA



Pax Verum Lythronax: Mex. Hot Chocolate

91

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Imperial oatmeal stout with cinnamon, cocoa nibs, vanilla, ancho chile, guajillo and de árbol peppers."

What our reviewers thought:

"Mellow nose with earthy chile overlaying milk chocolate. Light tobacco, milk chocolate, and earthy chile flavor up front, then the chile's fruitiness joins the chocolate to create nice balance. A touch of heat and cinnamon toward the end."

What our editors thought:

"A complex, flavorful aroma with subtle fruit esters helps to open the beer. Well-integrated chile heat builds steadily alongside cocoa and vanilla, forming a structured bitterness that finishes dry."

ABV: 8.5% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Lapel, IN



Roughtail Migrating Coconuts

96

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: "Imperial porter with toasted coconut and Madagascar vanilla."

What our reviewers thought:

"Sweet toasted-coconut aroma, with nuttiness and light vanilla supported by rich chocolate malt. Flavor is dessert-like frosted-cake, yet not overly sweet. Some roast and dark toasted bread-crust character. Lingering, sweet toasted coconut with Maillard caramel notes."

What our editors thought:

"Toasted coconut and milk chocolate aroma with a cookie note supporting, but the sweet perception of the aroma drops into a finely balanced dark-and-milk chocolate flavor, full but off-dry, with a snappy twang."

ABV: 7.8% **IBUs:** 20
Loc: Oklahoma City



Toppling Goliath Mornin' Delight 2025

97

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Espresso aroma followed by notes of maple syrup and coffee."

What our reviewers thought:

"The nose screams, 'Tim Horton's!' with bold aromatics of dark-roast coffee and rich maple syrup. The coffee and maple blend smoothly, offering an aggressively sweet, roasty experience."

What our editors thought:

"Rich roasted coffee aroma with lighter vanilla top notes and caramel-syrup midtones. Initially sweet and luxurious with a silky texture, but well-supported, as the fullness drops into a succinct coffee finish. Well paced and indulgent."

ABV: 12% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Decorah, IA



Wandering Monsters Dark Generosity

94

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Imperial stout with almonds, coffee, vanilla, cocoa nibs, cinnamon."

What our reviewers thought:

"Deep amaretto nose with rich almond and nutty marshmallow. Heavy sweetness with layers of chocolate. Red Hots cinnamon candy burn, in a good way. Rich, creamy, and nutty, with warming alcohol."

What our editors thought:

"Roasted malt and dark chocolate in the aroma with a bit of coffee, softened by a light, nutty graham-cracker note. Substantial on the palate, with a sneaky sweetness that quickly pulls back into smooth roasted coffee."

ABV: 12.3% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Cincinnati





Living Waters Barrel Aged Dyson Sphere (Construct IV)

97 AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Blend of stouts rested in W.L. Weller, Eagle Rare, Weller Full Proof, Willett Bourbon, and Willett Rye casks."

What our reviewers thought:

"Sweet bourbon nose with notes of vanilla, chocolate-covered cherries, Fig Newtons. The flavor is a boozy fig jam with notes of dark and red fruit covered in chocolate dripping in vanilla, soaked in bourbon. Medium to full body. Sweeter notes on the finish fall into a drier tannic state that asks you to take another sip."

What our editors thought:

"Chocolate and a bit of cinnamon spice in the aroma, Old Fitz-style, with some evolving nuttier tones and deep charred oak. Sweet initially in the sip, with some broad peanut and hazelnut notes alongside Belgian waffle with Nutella. That sweetness holds without cloying in the finish, gradually giving way to the strong and warming bourbon exhale. Finds indulgent and compelling flavor and aroma without pushing mouthfeel to the extreme."

ABV: 10.1% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Nashville, TN

BKS Artisan Ales in the Rye

93 AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Imperial stout aged in Willett Rye barrels for 34 months."

What our reviewers thought:

"Dark, deep, and boozy on the nose. Layered milk and dark chocolate in the flavor with caramel, light roast. Sweet, fudge-like chocolate leads into prunes, dates, and light cherries midpalate."

What our editors thought:

"Chocolate muffin and 50 percent cacao bar in the nose, with some toasted coconut top-notes that saturate the flavor alongside brown-sugar streusel. Doesn't drink boozy, but the bourbon-soaked exhale tells another story."

ABV: 15% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Kansas City, MO



Burial Houtenhamer 2025

91 AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Forged from Willett Rye barrels, then aged in fresh bourbon barrels."

What our reviewers thought:

"Subdued aroma of chocolate and some bourbon. Lightly caramel-malt background, with some roasted-malt character. Pleasing flavor, with a candy-like chocolate sweetness, rich vanilla, a balancing acidity, and a bit of volatile bourbon."

What our editors thought:

"Expressive aromatics of bourbon and barrel soften into cherry, brown sugar, and dark chocolate cake batter. Viscous, deep, with roast and oak bridging toward sarsaparilla on the finish."

ABV: 15% **IBUs:** 27
Loc: Asheville, NC



Helper Füligin

88 AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Notes of oak, vanilla, leather, candied nuts, cured tobacco."

What our reviewers thought:

"Vanilla, chocolate, coffee, and coconut in the aroma. An assertive hop bitterness in the flavor helps offset the dark molasses sweetness. Lighter in body than the aroma lets on. Overall, an appealing balance between sweetness and alcohol, while the bitterness adds a needed grounding."

What our editors thought:

"Spice-forward aroma gives way to white pepper snapping into focus immediately. Rye and warm alcohol notes lend to the overall depth, carrying espresso, char, and a long, lingering close."

ABV: 13.5% **IBUs:** 33
Loc: Helper, UT



Breakside A Spectacle To Be Consumed

90 AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Blend of imperial stouts aged in red wine, bourbon, and amaro barrels."

What our reviewers thought:

"Boozy, coffee-like, whiskey nose filled with very rich dark chocolate. You can smell the thickness of what's to come. Rich bourbon and deep, nutty chocolate lead into a sharp alcohol bite."

What our editors thought:

"Firm tannins frame a harmonious interplay of bourbon and red wine. Dark cherry, plum, tobacco, and burnt-sugar sweetness settle into a dry, dark-chocolate finish."

ABV: 12.8% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Portland, OR



Firestone Walker Parabola

86 AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 8

What the brewer says:

"Waves of black cherry, dark chocolate, vanilla, roast coffee, charred oak, nougat, espresso, cinnamon."

What our reviewers thought:

"Butterscotch on the aroma, layered with fudge, red fruit, and raisins. Barrel notes come forward on the palate with warming bourbon, baking spices, licorice, and alcohol. Minty on the finish with a lingering roast."

What our editors thought:

"A classic, old-school expression built on molasses depth and layered earthiness. Notes of fig, raisin, and dry leaves with gentle alcohol warmth lead into a firm bitterness that feels warm, rich, and inviting."

ABV: 14.1% **IBUs:** 51
Loc: Paso Robles, CA



Hop Butcher Lincoln Anniv. Stout III

94 AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Double bourbon barrel-aged imperial stout."

What our reviewers thought:

"Warming bourbon nose with notes of licorice and nutmeg. Rich, opulent body with multiple layers of flavors: black currant, chocolate, vanilla, bourbon, fruity esters, licorice, baking spices. Sweet finish ends with a touch of cinnamon. Layered complexity and baking spices throughout."

What our editors thought:

"Strong bourbon aroma with layers of roast, char, and vanilla-caramel mid-tones. Bold and spirit-forward in the flavor, round and smooth with glass-coating legs but not syrupy. Sharp and defined with a strong bourbon retronasal linger."

ABV: 14% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Chicago



Maplewood Barrel-Aged Cuppa Neat WLR

94

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Showcases pure barrel expression, delivering rich cocoa, caramel, toasted oak, a touch of vanilla."

What our reviewers thought:

"Nose is fresh chocolate, sweet whiskey. Boozy chocolate up front, some light roast behind. Accented by hints of vanilla and oak from the barrel. Subdued whiskey character lets the smooth, rich stout flavors shine."

What our editors thought:

"Strong bourbon in the aroma, with backing chocolate tones and an almost peanut butter-like nuttiness. Firm in the flavor, with layered nutty and chocolate-liqueur notes that remain nimble and resolve quickly."

ABV: 13.9% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Chicago



pFriem 2025 Blender's Reserve

94

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"A blend of our best barrels and our finest work."

What our reviewers thought:

"Unique aroma—an herbal Boulevardier/Manhattan component. Sweet dark fruits—raisin, dates, figs—on the palate, with an herbal vermouth flavor. Warming finish with baking spices, plum, and cedar notes."

What our editors thought:

"Peppy American aroma with citrus-forward hops and a hint of roasted malt. Flavor is a masterpiece in modern execution, seamlessly blending citrus notes with milk chocolate in the malt, accenting with subtle vanilla barrel overtones."

ABV: 12.4% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Hood River, OR



Pivotal Kaleidoscope Trope

89

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Chocolate morsels and milk chocolate with notes of espresso martini, candied fig, toasted almonds."

What our reviewers thought:

"Chocolate and assertive whiskey aroma. Smells like a freshly emptied whiskey barrel. Sweet, caramel flavor is definitely more whiskey-forward with some roasted-malt notes."

What our editors thought:

"Unapologetic barrel presence—vanilla, oak, molasses—immediately sets the tone. Layered and expressive, with dark fruit and licorice, while the subtle expression of alcohol rests quietly in the background."

ABV: 13% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Bristol, RI



River Bluff Booz'd Ego 2025

89

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 3
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Barrel-aged stout. Red-wine barrel and bourbon barrel blend."

What our reviewers thought:

"Nose of chocolate, aged wood, pricey bourbon, and red wine. Chocolate flavors match well with the red-wine character. Nutty and almond-like. Sufficient hop bitterness for balance. Sweet with a lingering tannic bitter finish."

What our editors thought:

"Red wine drives the aroma and sip, initially overshadowing the bourbon. Lean and light bodied, with dark chocolate notes and a roastiness that complements the barrel selection."

ABV: 11.6% **IBUs:** 64
Loc: Saint Joseph, MO



Motosonora Road Del Bac

87

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Our Road of Bones imperial stout aged in Whiskey Del Bac mesquite whiskey barrels."

What our reviewers thought:

"Oak, whiskey, Tootsie Roll—chocolate, fudge on the nose. In the flavor, rich roast and chocolate up front, with a flavorful barrel component walking down the entire palate. As it warms, a touch of cedarwood and baker's spice adds a welcomed depth."

What our editors thought:

"Whiskey barrel leads with confident oak, honey, and vanilla. An old-school sensibility is soft and full on the palate, with a persistent alcohol warmth."

ABV: 12% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Tucson, AZ



Phase Three Minutiae Reserve (2025)

95

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"A rich base stout balanced by oak tannin, notes of cocoa, toffee, vanilla."

What our reviewers thought:

"Thick and sweet. Fudge, dark chocolate, Malt-o-Meal on the nose with hints of raisin, fig jam, dates, and soy sauce. Intense, complex flavor is syrupy chocolate goodness."

What our editors thought:

"Chocolate-dipped waffle-cone aroma with sharper backing dark chocolate. Strong vanilla notes in the flavor amplify the appearance of sweetness with nutty and toasted coconut midtones, but it resolves quickly with a light bitter-chocolate finish. Indulgent yet concise."

ABV: 13.5% **IBUs:** 35
Loc: Lake Zurich, IL



Renegade From the Depths

86

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 8

What the brewer says:

"Brandy and apple aromas, fluffy mouthfeel, lingering finish with notes of brandy, caramelized apples, chocolate, spice."

What our reviewers thought:

"Subdued aroma of dark chocolate, fudge, hint of apple. Barrel is subtle. Flavor is estery with a well-matched bitterness and sweetness and a refreshing lightness and acidity from the apple brandy."

What our editors thought:

"Roast and gentle oak on the nose before fruit carries through the body. Notes of chocolate, raisin, and honey lead into a sweet spiced-apple finish, with acidity keeping the alcohol in check."

ABV: 13.8% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Denver



Roaring Table Observer & Observed

91

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Bourbon barrel-aged imperial stout. A big, rich, luxurious beer."

What our reviewers thought:

"Sweet, chocolate, and boozy on the nose with a hint of oak. Big sweetness in the flavor, but a residual bourbon flavor cuts through and adds a nice bite. Vanilla, chocolate-covered almonds, and a hint of cherry from the barrel help to add complexity."

What our editors thought:

"Roasty chocolate aromatics meet a pronounced barrel character in a purposefully restrained fashion. Vanilla and maple emerge mid-palate, with oak helping to pull the beer into balance before a strong finish of caramel, toffee, and almond."

ABV: 13.5% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Lake Zurich, IL



Roughtail Imperial Seal

91 AROMA: **11**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **19**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says:

"Imperial stout aged in Stagg Jr. and Blanton's bourbon barrels."

What our reviewers thought:

"Big, fudgy sweet chocolate on the nose. Fudgy mouthfeel with a deep, incredibly rich dark-chocolate taste—wonderful chocolate cake and mousse-like. Sweet, boozy, very chocolate-heavy. Oak tannins help balance, but the beer stays very sweet."

What our editors thought:

"Strong dark-chocolate aroma with a significant ethanol waft and some shortbread-cookie midtones. Sweeter chocolate in the flavor, with an initial round sweetness amplified by the strong spirit note. Boozy and rollicking."

ABV: 14% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Oklahoma City



Uprise Phases of the Moon

93 AROMA: **11**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **18**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **10**

What the brewer says:

"Imperial stout aged in rye barrels from Browne Family Spirits."

What our reviewers thought:

"Dark chocolate with honey and bourbon in the nose. Spicy rye hits up front in the flavor, then the malt sweetness comes through with a lingering whiskey-and-chocolate flavor. Hops add enough bitterness to help the beer finish balanced."

What our editors thought:

"American-ish slightly hoppy aroma throws some citrus in with the expected chocolate, and those hop notes carry into the flavor with just a touch of herbal heft, but it feels modern and cohesive with its own point of view."

ABV: 12% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Spokane, WA



Alvarado Street Motor Oil XXI

96 AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **20**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says:

"Showcases maple syrup, vanilla beans, espresso."

What our reviewers thought:

"Decadently smooth and thick imperial stout. Big, deep coffee notes dominate the aroma. Coffee, maple syrup, dark chocolate, and vanilla dance around each other, then smoothly transition into a warm finish. Warming alcohol."

What our editors thought:

"Deep coffee aroma with a bit of blueberry and maple that carries through in the flavor. Mid-sweet with a tightly edited body that's silky without feeling thick. Energetic roast notes push through with a semisweet chocolate thrust that drives into the finish."

ABV: 13.8% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Monterey, CA



The Veil Barrel Aged Sky Summoner

99 AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **20**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **10**

What the brewer says:

"Imperial stout conditioned on toasted coconut, Thai banana, and vanilla beans from Uganda, Tahiti, the Congo. Then aged in maple, apple-brandy, and Willett Reserve barrels."

What our reviewers thought:

"Obscenely rich aroma of exotic jungle fruit ripening on the forest floor. Mix of fruity flavors is heavily influenced by black cherry and apple. Every sip brings more layers. In the style of a well-made mole, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Thick, rich, layered and boozy yet still really well balanced. Not overly cloying, just a fantastic integration of everything that went into the beer."

What our editors thought:

"Banana candy, marshmallow, and stroopwafel in the aroma. Low carbonation pulls the sweetness forward, and the sheer heft of the body suggests a beer even sweeter, but the milk chocolate notes hold just enough weight to balance the sweetest top notes without crimping their style. Intense and saturated without overloading the meters, it pulls ranging flavors and immense body into a very cohesive whole."

ABV: 14.5% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Richmond, VA



Templin Family Jesse Delmar BA (2025)

94 AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **19**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says:

"A bourbon barrel-aged imperial stout."

What our reviewers thought:

"Nice quality bourbon aroma, with a touch of vanilla, toffee, coffee, and fudge. Nice balance in the flavor. Surprisingly easy to drink. Sweet malt is caramel-like. Would like to see more roast. The alcohol and bourbon are evident but not overwhelming."

What our editors thought:

"Light neutral aroma with a bit of roast malt and bread crust. More strident in the flavor, with a lively yet silky medium body and subtle barrel notes that complement rather than drive the flavor."

ABV: 12% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Salt Lake City



Westbound & Down Brewing W.L. Justice

93 AROMA: **11**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **20**
MOUTHFEEL: **4**
OVERALL: **10**

What the brewer says:

"Imperial stout aged in a single William Larue Weller barrel."

What our reviewers thought:

"Subtle aroma of bourbon, chocolate fudge, vanilla, and some roasted-malt backbone. Flavor is nicely boozy. Base beer is sweet and lightly roasted. Barrel character comes through as oak and vanilla in the flavor. The elements are all in balance. It's sweet enough to support the high alcohol level without being cloying."

What our editors thought:

"Toasted coconut and roasted coffee in the nose with a touch of licorice. Medium body stays livelier than many, and the nutty bourbon-chocolate tones grip quickly with a simultaneous deeper bitterness."

ABV: 14.6% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Lafayette, CO



American Solera King Size Candy Bar 2025

89 AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **18**
MOUTHFEEL: **4**
OVERALL: **8**

What the brewer says:

"Imperial stout aged in Bardstown Bourbon barrels with coconut."

What our reviewers thought:

"Coconut, chocolate, and nougat notes blend with hints of booze to create an aroma reminiscent of Samoas Girl Scout cookies. The sip is chocolate and coconut—shredded fresh, oven-toasted."

What our editors thought:

"Dessert-like sweetness on the nose sets the tone, followed by rich fudge and persistent coconut. Brownie batter, marshmallow, and coconut dominate a syrup-like body, while low-key oak and bourbon notes keep this warm and unapologetically intense."

ABV: 13% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Tulsa, OK



Arizona Wilderness Fate & Will

97

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Bourbon barrel-aged imperial stout steeped with orange peel, cacao nibs, vanilla beans."

What our reviewers thought:

"Big bourbon notes dominate the aroma. Flavor leads with orange peel. Chocolate and vanilla meld nicely with the orange to provide an enticing chocolate-orange-slice character. Finish is dominated by dark roast, which helps offset the sweetness."

What our editors thought:

"Alluring nose with a cocktail note—orange bitters, chocolate ganache, espresso. Full in the sip, yet firmly structured by strong but refined chocolate and roast bitterness."

ABV: 16.5% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Gilbert, AZ



Atrium Barrel Aged Bean's 2025

93

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Blended barrel-aged imperial stout conditioned on Sumatra coffee beans."

What our reviewers thought:

"Strong nose, and the flavor takes the coffee experience even further, with bright red-currant acidity, a deep, rich roastiness, and hints of boozy and oak. Creates the impression of an elevated coffee-shop experience in boozy beer form."

What our editors thought:

"Vivid coffee aromatics hit immediately, layered with chocolate, molasses, and caramel. White pepper, pipe tobacco, and anise add to the complexity, with oak and vanilla rounding out a well-composed finish."

ABV: 14% **IBUs:** 20
Loc: Louisville, KY



Breakside A Sweater for an Octopus

86

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Imperial stout aged in bourbon and Tennessee whiskey barrels with rooibos and black tea."

What our reviewers thought:

"Assertive roast character in the aroma accentuated by hints of black tea and earthy coffee. As the roasty heat subsides, tea-like bitterness and hints of boozy vanilla emerge."

What our editors thought:

"Earthy, woody aromatics, followed by a light umami profile with gentle bitterness. Dried plum and raisin dominate the mid-palate, with leather and tobacco lingering quietly in the background."

ABV: 13.9% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Portland, OR



Cinderlands Douse: Double Drum 2025

86

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Aged in bourbon and rye barrels. Infused with coffee, maple syrup, and vanilla bean."

What our reviewers thought:

"Holy maple, that runs the show. Bit of spirit comes out when it warms. A cinnamon hot-chocolate sludge (in a good way), slight roastiness. Rye dries out the palate and makes you breathe O-rings of coffee breath. The barrel character makes for a plummy, dried dark-fruit character."

What our editors thought:

"Sweet maple syrup gives way to coffee-driven roastiness, pointed acidity, and a subtle white-pepper spice. Vanilla and marshmallow follow softly, rounding the edges without dulling the contrast."

ABV: 13.9% **IBUs:** 60
Loc: Pittsburgh



Atrium 03

96

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: "Aged in bourbon barrels, conditioned on toasted coconut, cacao nibs, vanilla."

What our reviewers thought:

"Hot-fudge sundae with molten rich chocolate over French vanilla ice cream, lavishly sprinkled with toasted coconut. Bourbon and oak spiciness complement the flavors and add layers of complexity. Does all the things well."

What our editors thought:

"Strong toasted-coconut aroma with a fluffy angel-food-cake lightness. Richly satisfying in the sip, with full spectrum caramel, chocolate-chip cookie, and brownie notes."

ABV: 15% **IBUs:** 20
Loc: Louisville, KY



The Big Friendly Coffee Boom

88

AROMA: 9
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: "Imperial stout aged in bourbon barrels with roasted coffee beans."

What our reviewers thought:

"Aroma leans almost burnt-pot-of-coffee, but it's on the sweet side. Fruity bourbon takes center stage with chocolate and vanilla in supporting roles. Tastes like a thick slab of rich triple-chocolate cake with bourbon inflections."

What our editors thought:

"Dark chocolate on the nose leads into a viscous, thick pour with a silky, smooth texture. Bitter dark chocolate and espresso linger to the last sip, reminiscent of an iced mocha, as the overall sweetness and bitterness balance."

ABV: 13.1% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Oklahoma City



Cerebral Parallel Minds

87

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Aged in bourbon barrels. Conditioned on cacao nibs and walnuts."

What our reviewers thought:

"Roast malt, cocoa, vanilla swirl together in the nose, complemented by an earthy nuttiness and a healthy dose of booze. More booze and warmth early in the sip, but as that heat subsides, chocolate and oily, nutty notes."

What our editors thought:

"Enticing aromatics of dark chocolate and caramelized sugar lead into a firm bitterness that helps to rein in the sweetness. Rich brownie batter fills the midpalate, layered with oaky vanilla and earthy barrel tones."

ABV: 14.2% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Denver



Discourse World of Shadows

96

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Aged in Heaven Hill barrel, with coffee and vanilla."

What our reviewers thought:

"Cocoa nibs, chocolate syrup, vanilla, chocolate-covered cherries, coffee, and roastiness in the aroma. Tastes like a lava cake with bold bourbon to balance the Hershey's syrup. Hint of woody spice."

What our editors thought:

"Smooth roast coffee and hazelnut in the aroma, with a big vanilla envelope that amplifies the sweet appeal. Cacao husk and chocolate lead the fluffy sip with a polished bitterness. Dynamic push-pull between perception in the aroma and flavor."

ABV: 11.4% **IBUs:** 21
Loc: Overland Park, KS



Epic Big Bad Baptist

85 AROMA: **11**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **16**
MOUTHFEEL: **4**
OVERALL: **10**

What the brewer says:

"Imperial stout aged in used whiskey barrels. Infused with local coffee and cocoa nibs."

What our reviewers thought:

"Chocolate, whiskey, vanilla in the aroma. A lot of barrel comes through on the first sip, with coffee and chocolate taking a back seat. Plum, raisin, licorice in the flavor. Lighter body emphasizes the spirit."

What our editors thought: "Fruity esters lead with orange peel and blueberry, giving way to coffee bitterness that complements the barrel sweetness. Light body and an alcohol warmth help soften sharper edges."

ABV: 12.9% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Salt Lake City



Fonta Flora Candy Cap

93 AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **18**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **10**

What the brewer says:

"Bourbon barrel-aged imperial stout conditioned on candy cap mushrooms, vanilla beans, nutmeg."

What our reviewers thought:

"Smells like orange creamsicle, salt-water taffy, mint, almond, wet earth, and definitely maple. A maple-forward candy sweetness along with some herbal and cola hints. A puzzle of a flavor!"

What our editors thought: "Curious aroma with decaying wood, maple syrup, and light floral notes. Big and earthy in the sip, with touches of amaretto over single-origin chocolate. Captivating."

ABV: 14% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Nebo, NC



Fort George Peaches & Creamation

98 AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **20**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **10**

What the brewer says:

"Blend of imperial stout aged in bourbon and rye barrels. Conditioned on grilled peaches and vanilla."

What our reviewers thought:

"The nose is like a rich peach cobbler with caramel crust and a delicate waft of vanilla. The flavor leans much more heavily into peaches foster, with the caramelized fruit, alcohol, and vanilla all grounded by the dark malt of the stout."

What our editors thought: "Nutty noyaux note in the nose with a bit of peach, but bigger graham cracker and dark chocolate. Full and sweet in the sip, with huge peach notes amplified by almond, toasted coconut, and vanilla."

ABV: 13.9% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Astoria, OR



Jukes Giving Trees

93 AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **18**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says:

"Imperial stout aged in a maple-liqueur barrel. Finished on espresso, maple syrup, candy cap mushrooms."

What our reviewers thought:

"Earthy, rich coffee notes blend with subtle maple in the nose. An almost curry-like note emerges, creating a counterpoint to the sweetness. The aftertaste settles into vanilla, rum, and maple."

What our editors thought: "Big coffee burst in the initial aroma, with a toasted maple edge. Full and semisweet body, with sweeter milk-chocolate notes amplified by the strong maple. Like a great pop song, sweet yet catchy."

ABV: 13.2% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Elkhorn, NE



False Idol Summer Body Ready

90 AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **18**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **8**

What the brewer says:

"Barrel-aged imperial stout rested in rye whiskey barrels. Layered with cinnamon, maple."

What our reviewers thought:

"Lingering sweetness largely from the barrel. Layers of fantastic flavor unfold: charred oak, maple donut, rum, and spicy fruitcake."

What our editors thought:

"Minty herbal nose pulls elements of York Peppermint Pattie together with a touch of herbal amaro and some sweeter waffle-cone notes. Darker spirits-barrel herbal tones drive the flavor with some vanilla highlights, detouring from sweet expectations into rich herbal-liqueur territory."

ABV: 14% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: North Richland Hills, TX



Forgotten Road M 3rd 25th: Uneasiness ...

97 AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **19**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **10**

What the brewer says: "Blend of cognac and bourbon barrels with Brazilian planifolia vanilla beans."

What our reviewers thought:

"Dark chocolate, lava cakes, and vanilla-tinged chocolate hit your nose, with some spirit tucked in. Decadently creamy chocolate in the flavor with an aftertaste of cognac-soaked dried fruits, brown sugar, and leathery amaretto."

What our editors thought:

"Big marshmallow vanilla notes in the aroma, with floral and coconut edges. Clinically executed in the flavor as smooth barrel notes with a vaguely vinous edge soften the dark-chocolate malt notes, while vanilla pulls the caramel midtones forward. Sweet and alluring yet finely structured."

ABV: 14.3% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Graham, NC



Good Land Peaked

91 AROMA: **11**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **19**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **10**

What the brewer says:

"Buffalo Trace barrel-aged imperial stout. Conditioned on vanilla beans, sea salt, pecans."

What our reviewers thought:

"Inviting bourbon, vanilla, and velvety white-chocolate aroma. Flavor leads with marshmallow fluff with hints of bourbon, chocolate, and pecan. Sweet, but not cloyingly so. Smooth chocolaty decadent and silky finish."

What our editors thought:

"Pecans and caramelized sugar lead the aroma, giving way to a rich, full-bodied pour. Brown sugar and praline maintain balance and restraint, with sea salt enhancing the silky, dessert-like profile."

ABV: 11.3% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Traralgon East, Victoria, Australia



Lavery Devil Bird (2025)

97 AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **20**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says:

"Blend of barrel-aged imperial porters. Conditioned on cocoa nibs and vanilla beans."

What our reviewers thought:

"Lively bourbon on the nose, with vanilla, caramel, figs, chocolate-covered cherries, and young tawny port. Thick mouthfeel oozing flavors of dark fruits, chocolate, bourbon, roasted malt, vanilla. Finish is bold and bitter cocoa nib, with all the gooeyness of a pecan turtle cluster."

What our editors thought:

"Strong chocolate-liqueur note in the aroma, with some shortbread cookie and stroopwafel. Flavor leans Kit Kat bar, with a nice building chocolate bitterness in the finish."

ABV: 11% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Erie, PA



Living Waters Barrel Aged Papenoo

94

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “Barrel-aged stout rested on vanilla.”
What our reviewers thought: “Big, bold vanilla and dark chocolate notes in the aroma, with some barrel in the background. Quite sweet, but smooth and well-rounded, with the vanilla knocking any rough edges off the dark malts.”

What our editors thought: “Floral vanilla notes in the aroma, with an almost raspberry-like undercurrent, and deeper bourbon-barrel tones. Bready caramel notes in the flavor take on a demure matte sheen as the vanilla notes soften even the sharpest of the dark-malt flavors.”

ABV: 10.1% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Nashville, TN



Maplewood BA Cuppa Vanilla Rye

91

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “A Sazerac-barrel stout with vanilla, cacao nibs, and coffee.”
What our reviewers thought: “The nose presents fudgy aromatics of vanilla, milk chocolate, marshmallow, and a hint of roasted coffee all cut with bourbon. The sip is very boozy mocha that fades into vanilla. Thick body offers decadence, but the roasty bitterness helps to avoid cloying.”

What our editors thought: “Blend of big vanilla notes, licorice, and sugar-wafer cookie with some foundational charred oak. Hefty body is heavier on midtone caramel and chocolate than sweetness. Thoughtful yet distant.”

ABV: 13% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Chicago



Mikeroophone 2025 BA Imp. Smells Like Bean Spirit

92

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “Blend of barrel-aged imperial stouts conditioned on barrel-aged maple syrup, cocoa nibs, coffee beans.”
What our reviewers thought: “Coffee character leads and takes center stage while dusty dry cocoa, licorice, and soy sauce follow. Smooth bourbon notes add spicy highlights of cinnamon. Chewy. Warming without being overly hot.”

What our editors thought: “Dark chocolate leads the nose, with maple and coffee blending seamlessly. Silky, layered fudge defines the palate, remaining dense and cohesive through the final sip.”

ABV: 15.2% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Elk Grove Village, IL



Pure Project Velvet Zephyr

86

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: “Infused with cacao and sea salt. Aromas of dark chocolate, vanilla, oak.”
What our reviewers thought: “Aroma of chocolate, coffee, vanilla, boozy roast. Roasted malt notes in the flavor create the impression of espresso and dark chocolate. As that fades, boozy warmth emerges and lingers into the decadent finish.”

What our editors thought: “Sea salt adds welcome complexity, sharpening dry dark chocolate and a firm bitter finish. Dark cherry, vanilla, and roast come together with a subtle savory note as the profile continues to evolve as it warms.”

ABV: 13.6% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: San Diego



Lumberbeard Black Daylight

89

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 15
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “Imperial stout aged in Willett Bourbon barrels, then finished with vanilla beans.”

What our reviewers thought: “Marshmallowy vanilla up front, bit of chocolate-wafer cookie and spirit follow. Chocolate fudginess, chocolate cake, lots of vanilla, some barrel presence comes through strongly. A bit of a cola-like, prickly finish.”

What our editors thought: “Creamy, rounded aromatics lean heavily into vanilla and marshmallow fluff. Barrel character is present but restrained, with a welcoming hint of roast that adds structure without disrupting the softness.”

ABV: 14.2% **IBUs:** 65
Loc: Spokane, WA



Marto Coco Bomb

90

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 8

What the brewer says: “Rich chocolate decadence, warming bourbon barrel, oaky vanilla. Raw and toasted coconut added.”

What our reviewers thought: “Rich stewed-plum flesh and simple syrup with fruity but smooth alcohol vapors. Ridiculously opulent, but not cloying because of the boozy barrel qualities.”

What our editors thought: “Intense coconut on the nose—pulp and husk—leads into a dark, chewy palate that evokes Almond Joy in a bottle. A lingering nutty sweetness gives way to a baker’s-chocolate bitterness that helps to tighten the finish.”

ABV: 13.6% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Sioux City, IA



Our Mutual Friend Thanatoid

92

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “Imperial stout aged in rye barrels with vanilla.”

What our reviewers thought: “Slightly Scotch-like in the aroma, with tobacco and leather. Some woody character lingers. Sweetness is restrained enough for balance. Barrel-forward, with some rum-soaked aged, dried fruits.”

What our editors thought: “Barrel-forward on the nose, with an initial softness from vanilla that sets the tone. Intermittent flashes of espresso bitterness, pipe tobacco, and leather deepen the lingering finish.”

ABV: 15.1% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Denver



Soul & Spirits Dead Leaves & Dirty Coke

96

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: “Bourbon barrel-aged imperial stout rested on herbs and spices like a classic cola.”

What our reviewers thought: “Huge lime kick in the nose, with herbal spice, licorice, cedar, chocolate. Flavor has a bold, sweet stroke of sarsaparilla, spice, and rich chocolate. Weird and awesome, with a difficult-to-describe combination of booze, lime, spice, wood, and rich stout.”

What our editors thought: “Unusual and captivating aroma with strong cola notes, low-key smoked malt, and bright woody-floral hits. Drops down an octave in the flavor, with smooth chocolate malt notes supporting the cola spicing.”

ABV: 10.1% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Memphis, TN



TASTED: FLAVORED
BA STOUT & PORTER

Trap Door Interiority 2025

87 AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Stout aged on average 18 months, with vanilla beans and cacao nibs added."

What our reviewers thought:

"Hershey's chocolate syrup, chocolate cake, and Oreo cookies on the nose. Lots of sweet chocolate, slight roast, vanilla, marshmallow, and s'mores. Big bourbon flavors push against the onslaught of sweet. Sharp, bitter finish."

What our editors thought:

"Dark roast and bourbon aromas lead seamlessly into oak, vanilla, and barrel char. Smooth but firm bitterness cuts through the body, emphasizing cacao nibs and barrel character over malt sweetness."

ABV: 14% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Vancouver, WA



TASTED: SWEET STOUT & PORTER



August Schell Peanut Butter Chocolate Porter

98 AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: "Rich and creamy chocolatey flavors. Deceptively gentle and velvety seasonal brew."

What our reviewers thought:

"Aroma is really delightful with evidence of chocolate, chopped peanuts, and some vanilla. Flavor offers more of the same, with beautiful balance from toasted-malt character. Body is on the thin side, but it feels fuller with the nut oils. Roast and chocolate-malt richness with lingering roasted nuts. Excellent balancing astringency and bitterness to the finish. Very easy to drink."

What our editors thought:

"Milk chocolate and peanut butter dominate the nose, immediately reminiscent of a Butterfinger Crisp candy bar. The body stays light and airy, with minimal bitterness and a lingering sweetness that leans playful as opposed to dessert-heavy."

ABV: 6% **IBUs:** 25
Loc: New Ulm, MN

Bissell Brothers Umbra

96 AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Roasty and rich with notes of espresso, Tootsie Roll, and raw cacao."

What our reviewers thought:

"Comfortingly strong, smooth coffee roast throughout with dark, bitter baker's chocolate in the nose. Dark-fruit flavors take a back seat but complement with notes of fig and dried prune. Multilayered Dutch chocolate brownie batter with rich cocoa husk. Pleasant, clean, dry grainy finish."

What our editors thought:

"Bold from the outset, with up-front and unapologetic coffee bitterness. Sweet tobacco and dark chocolate follow, while oats soften the edges of the roasted malts."

ABV: 6.2% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Portland, ME



Fort George We Are the Night

92 AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Two-row, Golden Naked Oats, Victory, pale chocolate, roasted barley, Blackprinz, and flaked oats."

What our reviewers thought:

"Light-handed semisweet fudge, with notes of fruit-forward coffee lingering in the background of the aroma. Flavor follows suit, with enough creaminess to carry the oatmeal-stout moniker but leave the beer dry and drinkable."

What our editors thought:

"Milk chocolate opens the sip, flowing into a smooth, rounded, warm finish. Oats lend fullness as sweetness plays nicely with background bitterness and roast, accented by a hint of coffee-derived citrus and a playful lingering bite."

ABV: 5.7% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Astoria, OR



Trap Door Interiority Coconut

98 AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: "Includes vanilla beans, cacao nibs, and a mix of toasted and raw coconut."

What our reviewers thought:

"Coconut and rich chocolate dominate the aroma with some vanilla in the background. Flavor leads with sweet dark chocolate, then gently fades as a coconut aftertaste builds. Incredibly smooth alcohol warmth."

What our editors thought:

"Saturated coconut in the aroma ranges from fresh grated to nutty toasted. A fragrant vanilla sculpts the deeper roast-malt tones in the flavor. Bready notes surface as the sweetness and dark roast subside. Voluminous yet nimble."

ABV: 14% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Vancouver, WA



Cinderlands Yinzer Sundae Stout

91 AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: "Milk stout brewed with caramel, milk chocolate, white chocolate, and toffee."

What our reviewers thought:

"Caramel and toffee come through over the underlying chocolate and roasted-barley notes. The first sip is milk chocolate and coffee, followed by sweet caramel. Lingering finish is medium-sweet. Coffee and dark-chocolate bitterness balance."

What our editors thought:

"Dessert-forward aromatics present decadent notes of white chocolate and toffee. Creamy and full on the palate with gentle roast in the background, finishing with a lingering warmth of sweetness and confectioners' sugar."

ABV: 6% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Pittsburgh



Ghost Hawk Hollow Ground

90 AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says: "Half of the grist is caramel or roasted grains, enhanced by aging on some cocoa nibs."

What our reviewers thought:

"Aroma of milk chocolate gives way to deep roasted coffee, cocoa powder, and dank hops. The flavor is rich with cacao, with dark chocolate, a hint of light spice, and light caramel as it warms. Big, bold flavors."

What our editors thought:

"Dry cocoa powder and ground coffee on the aroma set the tone. Bittersweet chocolate carries through a soft mid-body with residual bitterness, while subtle floral notes lift the profile into a dry, pleasant finish."

ABV: 5.3% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Clifton, NJ



Grace Note Peel Good Inc.

91

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Stout with banana added."

What our reviewers thought:

"Compelling banana nose and flavor complement a smooth, pleasant beer and add a velvety, luscious feature to the mouthfeel. Decadent without the cloying sweetness. Thoughtfully balanced to feature banana while retaining light roast beer notes. Interesting and unique beer."

What our editors thought:

"Dark and gently warming, finishing dry and attenuated without sharp edges. Banana compote without the artificial taste blends seamlessly with soft chocolate tones, evoking warm chocolate-chip banana bread."

ABV: 6.2% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Jacksonville, FL



Guggman Haus Holly Jolly Ale

87

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 17
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 8

What the brewer says:

"Spice-forward holiday stout with notes of sweet gingerbread."

What our reviewers thought:

"An avalanche of nutmeg, ginger, and cinnamon in the aroma. Maple, lactose, and molasses team up with the chocolate and roasted-malt sweetness to stand their ground among all that spice. What emerges is an aggressively spiced holiday cookie in liquid form."

What our editors thought:

"An inviting aroma of toasted sugar and caramel opens into a layered spiced-malt profile. Clove, ginger, and allspice evoke warm ginger-snap cookies, finishing clean and dry, growing more expressive as the beer warms."

ABV: 7.4% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Indianapolis



Haggard Barrel Oats Tomorrow

86

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Oatmeal stout, restrained enough for pint drinking."

What our reviewers thought:

"Dark roast malts evident at modest level with notes of coffee taking a front-row seat. Cocoa nib-forward with hints of brownie batter in the flavor. Firm grainy heft. Finishes quite dry with a light, smooth bitterness. Lingering roast astringency."

What our editors thought:

"Roasted malt and dark chocolate lead, supported by a smooth, soft mouthfeel that keeps things light on the palate. Minimal bitterness with sweet cocoa powder emerges mid-body before the flavor fades cleanly."

ABV: 5.8% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: St. Louis Park, MN



Badger State Whitetail Stout

92

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 19
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Smooth stout pours black with a tan head. A balance of roastiness and sweetness leads to beer that is both rich and drinkable."

What our reviewers thought:

"Moderate roast character leads the charge. Sweet aromatics push against the strong, dark-malt backbone. Prominent pine and citrus hops ride a bed of smooth roast. A fair amount of bitterness holds the sweetness back a bit. Layered bittersweet chocolate carries all the way through the finish."

What our editors thought:

"Opaque and dark with a frothy white head, offering aromas of dark chocolate and damp earth. The body stays lighter than expected, finishing with lingering hop bitterness and roasted-coffee grains that keep it crisp and accessible."

ABV: 5.9% **IBUs:** 28
Loc: Green Bay, WI

Guggman Haus Frosty's Snow Crew Milk Stout

86

AROMA: 11
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 16
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Rich chocolate aroma and flavor, with balancing cinnamon and spice notes."

What our reviewers thought:

"On the nose, milk chocolate mixed with ancho chiles. In the mouth, creamy milk chocolate coats the tongue. Vanilla bolsters the chocolate, but the chiles and cinnamon are subdued."

What our editors thought:

"Warm, enveloping spices lead into a creamy, rich palate, with restrained cinnamon and gentle heat from ancho peppers. Finishes in an amalgam of dark chocolate and residual spice that lingers gently in the back of the throat."

ABV: 7.2% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Indianapolis



Guggman Haus Winner's Milk Jug Stout

93

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says:

"Refreshing creaminess and a smooth, delicious finish."

What our reviewers thought:

"Soft Hershey's milk-chocolate nose, with baker's chocolate roasted edges. German chocolate cake but without the overly rich aspects. Dense sweetness lasts through the finish. Newer-school approach to milk stout, leaning heavier on chocolate layering vs. roast and overall sweetness."

What our editors thought:

"A traditional milk stout with a modern approach, led by smooth milk chocolate and a full-bodied mouthfeel reminiscent of brownies and devil's food cake. Subtle touch of roast with lingering soft bitter chocolate."

ABV: 6.2% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Indianapolis



Soul & Spirits Coffee & Cigarettes

97

AROMA: 12
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 20
MOUTHFEEL: 5
OVERALL: 9

What the brewer says:

"Dark roasted Sumatran coffee meets cherrywood-smoked porter."

What our reviewers thought:

"Delicate smoke aroma with notes of dark fruit and chocolate malt. Nice smoke character with bold, rich coffee and a light cherry. Bitterness complements the wood notes and the smoke. Silky mouthfeel really delivers the complex roast flavors on a delightful platter of enjoyment."

What our editors thought:

"Pleasant smoke aromatics complement the coffee bitterness, with espresso-like roast and light campfire ash. The smoke remains restrained, working in concert with the coffee rather than overpowering it."

ABV: 6.8% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Memphis, TN



Cinderlands Nitro Pittsburgh Porter

90

AROMA: **11**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **18**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says:

"Pushes aromatic malt intensity against the cushion of a nitro pour."

What our reviewers thought:

"Nice toasted notes on the nose of rye cracker and light-roast coffee. Rich, bold baker's chocolate with light nutty character; soft roast-malt bitterness with sufficient residual sugar to provide balance. Pleasantly creamy mouthfeel. Excellent choice with the nitrogen."

What our editors thought:

"A nitrogen-induced lacy white head sits atop a deep brown body, pouring soft and silky. Light-bodied yet full and rich, delivering roasted coffee and dark fruit, before finishing with a soft, smooth finish."

ABV: 6% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Pittsburgh



Marto Plush

91

AROMA: **11**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **19**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says: "A malt-forward robust porter brewed with all-English malts, hops, and yeast."

What our reviewers thought:

"Bold aroma of boozy raisins, dark chocolate, coffee, light caramel, and a touch of tobacco. Sweet black-malt flavors on the palate with layers of dark cherry, chocolate, and dark-roast coffee. Sweet, roasty, and bitter."

What our editors thought:

"Semisweet chocolate aroma, supported by a dark pour and persistent brown foam. Silky and refined, with toffee sweetness balanced by malt-driven bitterness, finishing moderately attenuated with a gentle touch of sweetness."

ABV: 6.7% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Sioux City, IA



Solemn Oath Cold Black Night

92

AROMA: **12**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **18**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says: "A light and crisp refreshment glows as Kölsch traditions break through the deep, rich mahogany hues of this roasted-malt delight."

What our reviewers thought:

"Dark brown color with sticky tan foam. Dark chocolate malt and light floral hop in the aroma. Some background pear or berry esters. Full, rich, chocolate-malt flavor lingers well into the dry, lightly astringent finish. Nicely attenuated with a firm malt and hop structure. Easy drinking and would be great for a snow day at home."

What our editors thought:

"Restrained fruity esters, capped by a thick, creamy tan head atop a dark pour. An initial bite of dark bitter chocolate sets the tone before roast settles into the back palate, finishing light as sweetness briefly tries to pull it back into balance."

ABV: 4.9% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Naperville, IL

Alvarado Street Good Amber

90

AROMA: **10**
APPEARANCE: **2**
FLAVOR: **20**
MOUTHFEEL: **4**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says: "No gimmicks, no haze, no pastry. Just a damn good amber."

What our reviewers thought:

"Floral and citrus hop aromas sit on top of caramel malt notes. Citrus and pine hop flavors with light pome fruit notes. Light and airy on the palate. Sweeter malt-focused finish with a touch of bitterness that develops after the sip."

What our editors thought:

"Light-bodied and assertive, with a noted bitterness that keeps things moving. Hoppy, but not to the point of being overly distracting, allowing subtle caramel and toffee notes to appear beneath the copper-toned malt base."

ABV: 5.4% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Monterey, CA



Ever Grain Never in the Real World

88

AROMA: **11**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **18**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says: "Porter with notes of light-roast coffee, cocoa nibs, and toasted bread and an earthy hop-note finish."

What our reviewers thought:

"Chocolate-covered-cherry aroma. Flavors of caramel, light chocolate, coffee, and a touch of dark fruit. Medium body. Finish is roast and toast with a caramel-like sweetness and some lingering bitterness."

What our editors thought:

"Dark brown and inviting, showcasing a nice chocolate-malt presence with restrained bitterness and roast. The profile stays smooth and composed, ending with a noted orange-peel quality on the back palate."

ABV: 7.5% **IBUs:** 30
Loc: Camp Hill, PA



Prison City Dark in the Daytime

88

AROMA: **11**
APPEARANCE: **3**
FLAVOR: **18**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **9**

What the brewer says: "American stout with roast and chocolate flavors. Full-bodied."

What our reviewers thought:

"Huge, bold roast aroma and flavor heavily shrouded in American hops. Enough restrained sweetness and bitterness to keep it interesting, and the finish pushes a hint of a C-hop through to the end."

What our editors thought:

"A tan, mocha head crowns a molasses-dark body, releasing baker's chocolate and coffee aromatics. An initial bite of hops followed by layers of sweetness and bitterness leads into charred roastiness that lingers well past the last sip."

ABV: 7.5% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Auburn, NY



Black Spruce Rebel Rebel

87

AROMA: **10**
APPEARANCE: **2**
FLAVOR: **17**
MOUTHFEEL: **5**
OVERALL: **10**

What the brewer says:

"American amber ale with rye. Hopped with Mosaic and Cascade."

What our reviewers thought:

"Bright, fruity, tropical Starburst aromas followed by pine. Low honey malt. Some floral and herbal notes. Lots of juicy tropical fruits, like guava."

What our editors thought:

"Golden amber in color with excellent head retention, opening with a fruity hop aroma marked by citrus and pine. The initial sip is smooth, built on a toasted cracker foundation, with red apple and grapefruit carried by a measured bitterness."

ABV: 5.7% **IBUs:** N/A
Loc: Fairbanks, AK



Brother Chimp Well Red Monk

88

AROMA: 10
APPEARANCE: 3
FLAVOR: 18
MOUTHFEEL: 4
OVERALL: 10

What the brewer says: "An Irish-style red ale with malt-driven flavors of toasted grains, a mild sweetness, and a touch of roast barley."

What our reviewers thought: "A wallop of perfectly toasted toast on the nose. Upon drinking, you get butterscotch, some nice nutty notes, and a bit of plum. Very drinkable and smooth with an aftertaste of warm Saltine crackers."

What our editors thought:

"Dark ruby in color with an approachable malt-driven aroma. A sturdy background with toasted notes throughout carries the beer, while sweetness and subtle bitterness pair neatly without being too heavy."

ABV: 5.1% **IBUs:** 23
Loc: North Aurora, IL



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2025 Brewer's Retreat, in photos: Sierra Nevada in Mills River, North Carolina, was an excellent host for our annual retreat. Here are a few highlights from an incredible few days of brewing together. **Top row:** Group photo in the Sierra Nevada High Gravity room; whole-cone hops; Brian and Ken Grossman work through recipe details. **Second row:** Brian Grossman explains the brewing process to son Jackson while Ken looks on; a morning panel discussion on hops with Vinnie Cilurzo, Matt Brynildson, and Michael Roy; Matt Brynildson and team monitor a brew; Vinnie Cilurzo rubs hops. **Third row:** Front, from left: Jamie Bogner, Marika Josephson, Neil Fisher, Brian Grossman, Ken Grossman, Evan Price, Brian Rauso, Natalie Cilurzo, Vinnie Cilurzo, and Michael Roy; rear, from left: Doug Reiser, Jeremy Inzer, Tim Gormley, Todd Boera, Khristopher Johnson, Matt Brynildson, Bob Kunz, Tiff Kunz. **Fourth row:** Closing toast on the Visuals rooftop; Khristopher Johnson checks a kettle; Vinnie Cilurzo, Bob Kunz, and team drain the hop baskets.

