



BEER
TASTING
QUICK
REFERENCE
GUIDE

BY
JEFF
ALWORTH

**BEER
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QUICK
REFERENCE
GUIDE**

**HOW TO
CHOOSE
AND TASTE
BEER
LIKE A
BREWER**

**BY JEFF
ALWORTH**



CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

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INTRODUCTION

There are two kinds of beer drinkers in the world—those who believe they know everything they need to know about beer, and those who believe they’ll never know enough. The former group—by far the largest—usually wants their beer, like their favorite barstool, to be comfortingly the same every time: fizzy, yellow, and ice cold. The second, rapidly growing group seeks to experience the vast diversity beer has to offer. Some may have just started venturing into the broader world of weizens, lambics, and stouts, while others may have been brewing for decades. But with every new release, every revival of a lost style, every use of a new and unexpected ingredient, there’s more to learn.

If you are in that second group, this guide will help you on your explorations. It describes the basic composition and central flavor elements of beer, the different styles, and the methods you need to analyze and discuss good beer. Once you understand why some beers are tart and others spicy, why some taste like lemons and others like bananas, and why some are still and others as lively as champagne, you’ll soon be evaluating every pint like a professional brewer. You may never learn everything there is to know about beer, but you’ll have a fantastic time trying.

Cheers!

WHAT IS BEER?

Despite all the types and styles—ale, lager, bock, barleywine, and so on—beer is a simple beverage: fermented grain, usually spiced. The earliest brewers discovered the basic recipe by chance, when some sprouted grain was left alone in water and fermented, producing beer. Over time, people learned how to control the malting process, figured out that adding spices helped balance the sweetness of the grains (usually barley, but sometimes wheat or other grains), and ultimately (millennia later) realized that yeast was the magic ingredient that made the whole thing go. Despite all the categories and styles to distinguish the recipes that make up all the different beers, these are nothing more than variations on a theme first developed over six thousand years ago.

How Beer Is Made

Raw grain is indigestible to yeasts, so before it even arrives at a brewery, the grain must be converted to malt—a process of germination and drying that converts the starches within each seed to sugar. The first step in the brewing process is to steep this malt in hot water, making “barley tea,” also known as the “mash.” As it steeps, the malt releases its sugars into the water. A brewer may use as few as one kind of malt or as many as a half dozen; the malts add the colors and flavors needed to create each style of beer. The more malt that’s used, the higher the potential strength, or alcohol content, of the beer.

Next, the brewer separates the water and spent grains and brings the liquid, now called “wort” (rhymes with “flirt”), to a boil. At this point, hops are added to balance the malt sugars with bitterness. The longer hops are in the boil, the more their acids are converted to bittering compounds; later hop additions contribute flavor and aroma. The most delicate, evanescent, aromatic compounds of hops’ essential oils are so volatile that the last addition may spend almost no time in the boiling wort.

Finally, the liquid is strained again and cooled. When it reaches an optimal temperature for the intended style, brewers add (or “pitch”) yeast and let the billions of little fungi take over. Humans, it is said, make wort; yeast makes beer. Some yeasts ferment at between 60° and 75°F; these are the ale

Lager strains like it a bit cooler, just above 50°F. Fermentation takes several days, and then beer is further aged (or “conditioned”) to let flavors round out and develop. Ales can be ready to package in a couple of weeks. Lagers, noted for their clean, elegant flavors, do better when left to age for a month or two. A small number of beers require even longer aging—months or years, usually in wooden casks or vats. Usually very strong or made with wild, sour yeasts, these beers require the extra time to reach full maturation.

TASTING BEER LIKE A BREWER

A simple glass of beer offers dozens of sensations—colors, aromas, textures, and flavors. All these can be distinguished even by the novice drinker; in some cases, beginners bring an acuity with the excitement of discovery that old pros have long lost. Yet many of the sensations are telltale clues about the ingredients and methods that went into making the beer. Developing a sense for those clues is useful in taming the chaos contained in a single pint.

The Basics

Before we get into the compounds that create certain flavors and aromas, let’s go over the basics. Following are important terms used to describe general aspects of every beer.

Alcohol. Alcohol is sensed more than tasted. It may be a volatile, sharp note in the aroma or a warming sensation on the tongue—or even undetectable in low-alcohol beers. Alcohol is also lethal to foam, so if your head dissipates quickly, the beer may be boozy. Beers above 6% will exhibit an alcohol note, one that usually becomes prominent by 8 to 9%.

Attenuation. Some yeasts are finicky, and some are voracious; as a consequence, they consume different proportions of malt sugars. How well the yeast has fermented the sugars is known as attenuation. A highly attenuated beer will be thinner and have less malt flavor than a poorly attenuated one.

Balance. The balance of a beer refers to the harmony between contrasting elements—usually hops and malt.

Bitterness. While dark-roasted malt imparts a coffeelike bitterness, the term “bitterness” generally refers to that which comes from hops—a more tangy, resinous quality. Sometimes breweries include a rating of the International Bitterness Units (IBU) for their beers; above fifty is notably bitter, and below twenty is mild.

Color. In order to get a good sense of the color of the beer, don’t rely on what your glass reveals. Hold the glass up to the light and tilt it to create a shallow edge—beer will appear different in different circumstances. All of a beer’s color comes from malt, so while you may not be able to guess the entire grain bill, you can make inferences. Also, look to see if the color is opaque or clear, which gives clues to the degree of filtration and the presence of wheat and whole hops.

Hops. The character contributed by hops can vary broadly. In a standard tin-can beer, they fall below the threshold of human perception. In some beers, they are so abundant they exceed human perception. Beyond bitterness, they can add flavors like grapefruit, black pepper, or pine, or scent a beer with lavender, sage, or cedar—just to name a few.

Malt. Malt is responsible for the color of a beer, but it also adds flavor and some aroma. Like coffee, malt is roasted to different colors; the palest malts barely stain a beer, leaving it straw colored. Munich malts redden a beer, and dark malts blacken it. Malt also contributes flavors like bread, caramel, roastiness, nuts, leather, chocolate, and dark fruit.

Mouthfeel. One aspect of mouthfeel is body, but the term is broader. Qualities like creamy, flat or effervescent, hearty or thin are all aspects of mouthfeel.

Session. Both an activity and a beer category. “Session” beers are lower in alcohol to facilitate longer sessions of drinking without getting drunk.

Drilling Down

If you ever have the chance to drink beer with a brewer, listen to what he or she says. Brewers won't talk in generalities; they'll say things like “Is that iso I'm picking up?” or “I can smell the Simcoe hops.” It has the appearance of a magic trick—until you learn to recognize the signs yourself. Following are a few of the important flavor and aroma notes you'll encounter and what causes them.

Banana. Isoamyl acetate (the “iso” from the paragraph above) is a compound produced when German weizens ferment, and it's a dead ringer for bananas. In most other styles, this flavor is inappropriate.

Caramel. The flavor of caramel comes principally from a type of malt made when wet grain is kiln-dried. The method locks in complex sugars that can't be fermented and gives beer a distinctively caramelized flavor. The malt's name? Caramel, of course.

Citrus. Hops, and particularly American hops, often have qualities of grapefruit, passion fruit, or lemon. Connoisseurs, like oenophiles arguing varietals, have their favorites.

Clove. During fermentation, some yeasts produce a compound called phenol. It expresses itself as a clove note, sometimes with a touch of smoke. It's typical in German weizens and some Belgian ales.

Fruitiness. Esters are an important flavor compound created in fermentation, and they give a beer a fruity aroma and the perception of sweetness. Esters are one of the key compounds that distinguish ales (which have them) from lagers (which don't).

Funk. One class of beers, mostly from Belgium, is made from “wild” yeasts and bacteria. These are sour beers. Some are vinegary, some tart, and some composty. Like stinky cheeses, they are generally an acquired taste.

Haze. While most brewers aim for bright clarity in their beers, some beers have an intentional haze. Wheat stays in suspension, creating a pleasingly doughy appearance, and particles shimmer inside vibrantly hopped beer.

Off-flavors. Not all flavors are intentional. Some flavors might be appropriate in one style but clash with flavors in another. Others shouldn't be in any beer. Classic off-flavors are cooked vegetable, harsh pepperiness, butter, metal, solvent, or skunk. Keep an open mind, but if the beer is insistently unpleasant, you're probably dealing with off-flavors.

HOSTING A TASTING

Beer tastings don't have to be formal, and they don't have to be blind. You don't necessarily need any tools beyond several types of beer and some eager participants. However, conducting a blind tasting can be very educational, teaching you about both the beers and your own palate. Lest you misinterpret the word "blind" here, the goal is not to conceal your eyes or the beer, just the label. A blind tasting limits a person to only the information the senses can provide. The meddlesome brain—which would otherwise try to influence your perception and taste buds with extraneous information, like the beer's brewery, place of origin, style, and ingredients—is sidelined.

I have participated in blind tastings with as few as three beers and as many as seventeen; I've been in single-style blind tastings and tastings where the styles were not identified. In some, tasters know which beers are in the flight; in others, the beer names are hidden. In short, you can make your own rules. Follow your instincts and desires and enjoy yourself—after all, a tasting is just another good excuse to spend an evening drinking your favorite beverage.

Setting up the Tasting

There are no rules, true, but there are some handy procedures. Except for the beer, everything you need to conduct a tasting is included in this kit: bottle sleeves for blind tasting, Tasting Notepads, and a tasting-terms cheat sheet. Beyond these necessities, it's also nice to have a carafe of water handy for palate cleansing—and maybe a basket of crackers or bread. Unlike wine tastings, one thing you never need is a spit bucket.

Serving the Beer

Most beer in pubs and restaurants is served far too cold. Chill temperatures inhibit flavor and aroma compounds and also anesthetize one's palate. No beer should be served below 45°F, and most are best around 50° or 55°F. Refrigerators, unfortunately, keep food at a frosty 35°F. So, a half hour before your tasting, pull the beers out of the fridge and leave them to warm. As you continue your tasting, return to the beers as they warm; you'll find the flavors and aromas continue to unfold and blossom.

Another important consideration is glassware. As breweries honed their styles, they found that different shapes helped accentuate the qualities of their product. As a consequence, there are a half dozen or more easily recognizable shapes and sizes of beer glasses, and hundreds of proprietary variations. For the purposes of tasting, though, you're better off with any glass that has a rim narrower than its belly. This shape captures and concentrates aroma, a critical element of tasting. Certain glassware is designed for this purpose, but in a tasting, snifters or wine glasses are excellent choices.

Carbonation levels vary by beer style, so different beers will behave differently when poured. Some Belgian beers are extremely lively and will create snowy drifts; other beers, like British stock ales, might come out nearly still, and rousing a head is impossible. Generally speaking, pour the beer directly into the center of the glass—this will produce a decent head in most beers. As you're pouring samples, *make sure to leave some beer in the bottle*. This allows you to return to beers for comparison. (Alternately, save one unopened bottle for later.) Once you pour the beers, you can begin sampling immediately—no need to let them breathe. Finally, be sure to rinse glasses between flights with a splash of water, particularly for beers of different styles.

Tasting the Beer

The experience begins with a nice pour. Make sure you have purchased enough beer so everyone gets 3- to 4-ounce pour—and then get a bit more. It's nice to be able to return to a beer for a final sip. Bee

is unique among beverages in its capacity to retain a head, so make sure to rouse about a half inch when you pour samples. Then:

See. Examine the beer for color, clarity, viscosity, and head quality.

Smell. Rouse the aromatic compounds by swirling the glass, and then get your nose in the glass and inhale. Continue to return to the aroma as you drink; the flavors and smells are linked and inform one another.

Sip. Flavors present themselves at different moments. When the beer first meets the tongue, foreground flavors present themselves.

Swallow. The flavors continue to evolve as the beer travels down the throat. Later flavors emerge, including certain volatile notes. Swallowing also reveals the level of attenuation. Even after the beer is completely out of your mouth, the flavors will evolve; this is what's meant by "aftertaste." Under no circumstances does a beer drinker ever spit out a mouthful!

Note. Write down your impressions of a beer. Capture unique or unexpected flavors; use an adjective that communicates how the beer makes you feel. You don't have to write a complete and lyrical account of each beer, but include those things that make it distinctive—for good or ill. Jotting down key information will help you remember the beer in the future, and it will remind you to see, smell, and sip with care.

BEER STYLES

ALES

Until quite recently in brewing's long history, all beers were ales. Lagers came on the scene only 150 years ago, and they flourished with the arrival of refrigeration. Before lagers, a single family of yeasts made beer (and bread and wine): *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. That's why every historic brewing country has at least a couple traditional ale styles, and why ales, though they now constitute a small minority of the market, are represented by many more styles.

Ales are made with strains of yeast that work better at warmer temperatures, usually around 68°. At these higher temperatures, yeasts produce more flavor compounds than they do in lagers, which are fermented cold. What all ale styles have in common are these compounds, which make ales by turns fruity or spicy. The ales of England are maltier and sweeter, while those in Belgium are often tart and spicy. In Germany, some of the ales do a nice lager imitation, but others—particularly wheat ales—are strange and wonderful.

Pale Ales and Bitters

COLOR straw to copper

ALCOHOL 4–5.5%

IBU RANGE 20–50

Background

Bitters and pale ales are the standard pub beers of Britain, noted for their balance and drinkability. In the United States, pale ales have become a template for citrusy native hops.

Flavor and aroma

Pale ales feature bracing hoppiness. In the United States, they are floral and citrusy; in Britain, more earthy and peppery. Bitters are maltier and almost always have a comforting nutty/biscuit quality.

Character

Interestingly, pales are often not pale, nor are bitters especially bitter. The designations are relative, and so a pale ale may be amber and rounding the corner toward brown. A traditional bitter, meanwhile, may have only soft brushstrokes of hop bitterness. These are the workhorses of the “session” beer category—those lower-alcohol beers designed to be drunk in twos and threes, over an evening at the pub. Both styles are designed to be balanced so that neither malt nor hop overwhelms the palate. Bitters are sometimes broken into three categories—bitter, best bitter, and extra special bitter—to indicate alcohol strength.

Blind Tasting Idea

Try a selection of Old and New World (European versus North American) pales and bitters to see how the style has evolved and changed.

India Pale Ales (IPAs)

COLOR golden to amber

ALCOHOL 5.5–7.5%

IBU RANGE 50 and up

Background

Alcohol is a preservative, and many of the beers shipped around the world during the days of the British Empire were hearty and strong. The most famous is India Pale Ale, named for its destination.

Flavor and aroma

A showcase for hops, IPAs blossom with vivid scents of citrus or spice, and the flavors are concentrated, sharp, and resinous. Underneath is a slightly sweet foundation of biscuit or caramel.

Character

In the country of their birth, IPAs have become little more than variations on pale ales. It's in the United States where the style is now king. On the West Coast, IPAs feature exotic hop flavors, some piney, some intensely citric, some with even stranger flavors like marijuana and tropical fruit. On the East Coast, examples hew closer to the historic standard, with traditional earthy/peppery hopping.

Blind Tasting Idea

Compare a flight of IPAs from the East and West Coasts.

Ambers, Reds, and Browns

COLOR amber to chestnut

ALCOHOL 4–6%

IBU RANGE 20–40

Background

Brown ales date back to the nineteenth century in England, while amber and red ales are American creations. All harness darker roasts to achieve richer, malt-forward ales.

Flavor and aroma

The use of darker malts can produce a surprising array of differing flavors and scents: caramel, honey, hard candy, nuts, and grain. Hops, usually a secondary note, burnish the malts.

Character

Positioned between pales and porters, these variously named ales highlight the subtleties of malt. Ambers and browns are fuller bodied, while reds are often filtered thinner to highlight their color. Some new American reds are actually IPAs, so study the label.

Blind Tasting Idea

Compare a flight of ambers, reds, and browns to a porter and a hoppy pale ale and notice the subtle malt flavors.

Porters and Stouts

COLOR ruby to obsidian

ALCOHOL 4–12%

IBU RANGE 20–100

Background

Among the most important styles historically, porters and stouts were once the principal exports of the

British Empire; they were also the beers of the American revolution (George Washington brewed porter). Thanks to Guinness and the American revival, they are still among the most popular today.

Flavor and aroma

The category includes a range that goes from light and sweet to motor-oil thick and coffee bitter. On the lighter end, they're a perfect crossover beer for novices—on the other, they're an acquired taste.

Character

Porters and stouts are dark ales, but beyond that their names are somewhat misleading. Some porters are as light and gentle as malted milk, as are oatmeal stouts and sweet stouts. Some porters may be light but still have intense, charcoal bitterness, as do Irish stouts. Finally, the beers originally shipped from England to the Baltic region, known now as Baltic porters and imperial stouts, are both very strong (up to 10% alcohol). Generally speaking, stouts are roastier, but beyond that, the sub-styles twist like snakes in a barrel.

Blind Tasting Idea

Compare a flight of porters, including Baltics; compare a flight of stouts, including Irish and imperial, or compare stouts and porters to one another.

Strong Ales

COLOR golden to russet

ALCOHOL 8–14%

IBU RANGE 50–100

Background

Old ales and barleywines are the classic strong ales, meaning they have high alcohol contents, but variations proliferate in every country and region.

Flavor and aroma

Strong ales exhibit the character of age—leather, raisins, or plum, as well as port- and sherrylike alcohol. American strong ales are meant to be served young, and they exhibit sharp alcohol and intense hopping.

Character

In Britain, strong ales were designed to age. Brewed with darker malts that take on rich, plummy notes and at strengths in excess of 8%, they mature for months or years. Some last decades. But strong ales also refer to a category of American ales, usually modified by the words “double” or “imperial.” These are the most intensely hop saturated and bitter of the hoppy ales, a character enhanced by volatile, sharp alcohol.

Blind Tasting Idea

Although it takes foresight, buy a selection of barleywines and old ales and age them a year; then, at the end of the year, compare these with current bottlings of the same beers. If you have the cellar space and time, hosting these kinds of annual “vertical tastings” (the same beer from different vintages) can be a blind tasting highlight. (For more on this, see “Cellaring Beer and Vertical Tastings,” [page 46](#).)

Scottish and Irish Ales

COLOR amber or red

ALCOHOL 4–8%

IBU RANGE 15–30

Background

Being outside the hop belt didn’t stop the ancient Picts from brewing four thousand years ago. Before they began distilling their beer, Irish and Scottish brewers made creamy malty brews spiced with sweet gale, heather, and other local herbs.

Flavor and aroma

Brewed to accentuate the malt, modern Irish and Scottish ales are silky, creamy, and very gently hopped; Scottish ales are nutty, while the red ales of Ireland have a toffee sweetness.

Character

In successive waves, stout and lager took larger and larger chunks out of the market for light, toasty ales, but a few still survive. These, and the revival ales in the United States, are characterized by reddish malts and may have a touch of roasted barley for contrast. Scottish ales have fared better and wider range is still popular. They start with low-alcohol session ales and extend to robust “wee heavies” in excess of 7% alcohol. Mashed warmer than other ales, they have more residual sugars that make even the session-strength versions hearty.

Blind Tasting Idea

Try a flight of Scottish ales, from session-strength to wee heavies.

Belgian Ales

Belgian ales come in all colors, strengths, and IBUs.

Background

The world’s greatest diversity of native beer styles comes from Belgium. Certain taxonomists divide the beers into a dozen categories, others into scores. What distinguishes these strange and wonderful ales are Belgian yeasts, which produce unexpected flavors and aromas.

Flavor and aroma

Belgian ales are often full of fruity notes or exotic spices; some are tart or tangy (or full-blown sour) while others are dry and vinous. All these form a cluster of qualities some people use shorthand to describe as “Belgian character.”

Character

Belgians are the free spirits of the beer world. They are simultaneously the most innovative and the most traditional. Some brewers use the same techniques that were used a millennium ago, but Belgian brewers also sample broadly from other countries, use strange ingredients, and merrily flout convention. In Belgian beers, you can see the future and the past.

Some of the more important sub-styles include two worth bookmarking: farmhouse ales and strong ales. Farmhouse ales (saisons and biere de gardes) are rustic beers often made with spices and wheat; like hearty bread from a good bakery, they are rich, fresh, wholesome, and delicious. Belgians regularly employ sugar to make strong ales of winelike strength and complexity, some dark, some golden, most deceptively approachable.

Blind Tasting Idea

Comparing flights of farmhouse ales or strong golden ales makes for a delightful session, but even more entertaining is to walk into a bottle shop, pick up a half dozen unknown beers from Belgium (they’re legion), and start sampling.

Abbey Ales

COLOR golden or reddish brown

ALCOHOL 6–10%

IBU RANGE 15–35

Background

Originally brewed only by monks, abbey ales are now brewed in the style of monastic beers—except for the six abbey ales still brewed in Belgium and the Netherlands by Trappists.

Flavor and aroma

These generally strong beers have varying profiles, but most vent alcohol and spice noses; on the palate they are rich but not heavy, strong but not aggressive, lively, and spicy-sweet.

Character

The traditional line of abbey ales runs at different strengths, from “single” to “triple”—though singles are rarely exported. Doubles (“dubbel” in Flemish) are typically ruddy and maltier, while triples (“tripel”) are usually honey colored and very strong. Most abbey ales are brewed with sugar, a technique that reduces the body and boosts the alcohol. They are refined ales—exhibiting layers of flavor—and are among the most prized in the world.

Blind Tasting Idea

The Trappist monks don't limit their yeasty outputs to beer; they also make cheese and bread. Select a range of cheeses—soft, blue, goat, even Cheddar—and see how the flavors of the abbey ales interact.

German Ales

COLOR kölsch, golden; altbier, copper to brown

ALCOHOL 4.5–5%

IBU RANGE kölsch, 20–30, altbier, 25–50

Background

Before Germany became famous for its lagers, all its beers were ales. The most famous are wheat beers, but two other ales are kölsch and altbier.

Flavor and aroma

Kölsches are light, delicate beers with just a touch of acid and hop spice, while coppery altbiers are among the most aggressively hopped German beers.

Character

Kölsches are the city beer of Cologne, where they are still brewed in great numbers. Originally heartier, they evolved to compete with pilsners but continued to be brewed with ale yeast strains, giving them more zest and fruitiness than their straw-colored, Bohemian cousins (from Czech Republic). In German, “alt” means “old,” and altbiers harken back to the prelager age of brewing. They also show the German proclivity toward clean, smooth beers. Alts are bitter, sometimes strikingly so. Yet since the hops are added largely at the beginning of the boil, the nutty flavors of malt still shine through.

Blind Tasting Idea

Altbiers and kölsches are transitional beers, halfway between ales and lagers. Try tasting a flight that includes pilsner, kölsch, and English bitter or dunkel, alt, and English brown ales to see how process and yeast affect flavor.

WHEAT BEERS

Barley is the principal grain used in beer production, but it's not the only one. Wheat malt is used in small amounts in many beers to add flavor and head retention, but it's also used as the predominant or sole grain in certain famous beer styles. Wheat adds a softer, breadier flavor, lighter body, and a rustic cloudiness to beers. Although it can be used in lagers, most wheat beers are ales.

German Weizens

COLOR golden to amber, sometimes cloudy

ALCOHOL 4–5%

IBU RANGE 10–15

Background

Known variously as weizen (wheat), weisse (white), or hefeweizen (yeast-wheat), these Bavarian beer styles date back centuries and, with their cloudy orange bodies, retain a medieval charm.

Flavor and aroma

Among the most interesting beers in the world, weizens smell and taste distinctly of cloves and bananas; these beers are softly bready, crisp, and very refreshing.

Character

For those who have never tried an authentic Bavarian weizen, the experience can be bewildering. Wheat's naturally high levels of ferulic acid and the native strains of yeast combine to produce compounds very close to those found in bananas and cloves. Because the beers are tart and crisp, they don't cloy. Many weizens have yeast suspended in the glass, an intentional and authentic presentation. No beer is more refreshing on a hot, summer day.

Blind Tasting Idea

Most American wheat ales are not brewed like Bavarian weizens; they express some of the wheat character but little of the fermentation compounds. Try comparing U.S. domestic and German weizens to see the difference.

Belgian Witbier

COLOR milky golden

ALCOHOL 4–5%

IBU RANGE 10–20

Background

Witbier (white beer) refers to a broad style category that died out in the mid-twentieth century. The brewer Pierre Celis, living in Hoegaarden, resurrected the wit style, which is now one of the most popular Belgian styles in the United States.

Flavor and aroma

Another crisp, tart ale, the nose and palate are often scented orange; however, this comes not from the orange peel, but from the coriander.

Character

Before Celis's revival beer, a brewer had great latitude in brewing witbiers, and the style had broad variation. Now all follow the revival. Generally this means the use of orange peel (bitter, sweet, or

both) and coriander, though brewers are beginning to include other spices as well. What results is a light-bodied, soft, slightly sweet—but dry—summer quencher.

Blind Tasting Idea

Compare witbiers, making sure to include the original Hoegaarden, and see how the spices are varied for different effect.

LAGERS

Often, lagers are called “bottom-fermenting” yeasts to distinguish them from “top-fermenting” ale strains. This is not only useless information, but it distracts from the more important distinction: lagers are fermented cold. As such, they don’t develop the fruity and spicy qualities that ales do. A classic lager has the straight, clean lines of malt and hop; there are no yeasty curveballs here.

Golden Lagers: Pilsner and Dortmund Export

COLOR straw to golden

ALCOHOL Pilsner, 4–5%; Dortmund, 5–6%

IBU RANGE Pilsner, 30–50; Dortmund, 20–30

Background

The first pale or golden lager was invented in 1842 in Plzen, Bohemia, in the Czech Republic. It was crisp, spicy, and gorgeous and took the world by storm. Two or three decades later, a similar beer, slightly heavier and less hoppy, emerged in the northern German city of Dortmund.

Flavor and aroma

The smell of authentic Czech pilsner is the smell of Saaz hops—spicy and zesty. German versions have more floral local hops, particularly Hallertauer. Both are characterized by a spicy, dry palate. Dortmund export is more malty but not sweet; the hops are milder than in pilsners.

Character

So many beers look like pilsners that there is broad confusion about what the term means. Most national beer brands are a far inferior descendant of the original. A true pilsner is a bold beer, bracing and refreshing. Because the delicate hops are such a feature of this style, freshness is critical. Dortmund export was initially brewed to slake the thirsts of factory men in this industrial city—it is less-refined beer, hearty, but also smooth and soothing.

Blind Tasting Idea

Pilsners and pale ales serve the same function but are remarkably dissimilar in flavor, texture, and effervescence. Try comparing the two; to enhance the contrast, include a selection of cheeses and see how the beers pair up.

Amber Lagers: Vienna and Oktoberfest/Märzen

COLOR amber gold to russet

ALCOHOL 5-6%

IBU RANGE 20-30

Background

These related styles emerged at about the same time in Munich and Vienna by two friends and colleagues—Anton Dreher and Gabriel Sedlmayr. It was the latter who brewed in the cool months of March (März) to produce beers for Munich's new festival in October.

Flavor and aroma

Both styles are meditations on malt. Oktoberfests, made from darker Munich malts, have a deeper, sweeter palate, while Viennas, usually hoppier, are drier and crisper.

Character

The lightly roasted malts that characterize these beers—Vienna and Munich—were so popular that they are now standards in brewing. What they produce are beautiful, autumnally hued beers ranging from amber to copper and red. A harmony of balance between sweet and dry, malt and hops, these styles are famously compatible with food.

Blind Tasting Idea

How are German and Italian cuisine similar? Order a pizza or barbecue sausage and watch how these beers complement both the acid of tomato sauce and meat spice.

Bock

COLOR pale to chestnut

ALCOHOL 6.5-8%; eisbock up to 15%

IBU RANGE 10-30

Background

This quintessential German beer style was first brewed five hundred years ago in Einbeck. It now includes a range of beers from the lighter maibock to the hearty doppelbock to the titanic eisbock.

Flavor and aroma

Bocks are brewed for strength, and even the light, springy maibock (May bock) may be 7% alcohol. Thus they exhibit a creamy malt sweetness, nuts, caramel, and warming alcohol notes; darker versions may have roasty suggestions.

Character

Bock has earned the reputation of concealing an iron kick inside velvety lobes of malt. The strength is hidden by very gentle treatment of the malt, often through decoction (a complex process of slowly raising the temperature of the mash by removing some of the liquid, heating it, and adding it back in) to produce soft, supple beers. Lighter-colored bocks (variously called helles or maibocks) can be a bit sweeter and gentler. Doppelbocks (“double bocks”) are generally more alcoholic and darker; their sweetness tends toward dark fruit. Finally, eisbocks (“ice bocks”) are distilled through a process of freezing and removing ice, leaving a more concentrated, stronger beer. They are intense, portlike, and alcoholic.

Blind Tasting Idea

Try a selection of bocks, sampling from light to dark.

Dark Lagers: Dunkel and Schwarzbier

COLOR ruby or brown to black

ALCOHOL 3.5-4.5%

IBU RANGE 15-30

Background

Dunkel is an old-style beer, dating back to sixteenth century Germany, and it was probably the first lager. Schwarzbiers (“black beers”) came later, possibly as a response to the popularity of English porters.

Flavor and aroma

Both of these dark lagers have rich, complex malt flavors, which tend toward caramel in dunkel, and toward dark chocolate and a gentle roastiness in schwarzbier.

Character

These overlooked styles are well received by almost all beer drinkers who have the fortune to encounter them, and it’s easy to see why. With their clean palates and rich malts, they manage a lovely balance between sweet and dry. The subtle play of dark malts make them perfect session lagers.

Blind Tasting Idea

Comparing dark lagers and ales makes for an enlightening session, but if it’s decadence you’re after, serve dark lagers alongside a selection of chocolates.

Light Lagers

COLOR bleached sand to pale gold

ALCOHOL 4-5%

IBU RANGE 5-15

Background

A descendant of pilsners, light lagers began their march toward market supremacy as a product of the industrial revolution. Born in the era of mechanization, they were one of the first beers to be mass produced; thanks to refrigeration and the steam engine, they could be sent hundreds of miles to new markets.

Flavor and aroma

The best examples have delicate, pleasing scents of honey and warm bread. Effervescence provides their essence—a fizzy, thirst quencher.

Character

Although easily dismissed, the character of light lagers does vary from country to country. Some are sweeter, others drier, and some have appreciable hopping.

Blind Tasting Idea

Buy some of the classic brands from around the world, like Pacifico, Labatt's, Singha, Harp, and Asahi. See if you can identify and distinguish the beers from one another. Dare ya!

SOUR BEERS

Most breweries spend hours each day making sure their facilities are free of unwanted bacteria and wild yeasts. But some brewers invite these little beasts in and let them take up residence in the crevices of wooden casks. They don't eschew sour beer—they engineer it. Certain bacteria and wild yeasts transform beer, making it tart, dry, and in some cases, puckeringly sour. Sour beers may be an acquired taste, but for some connoisseurs, they're the final frontier.

Lambics

COLOR golden or fruit-colored

ALCOHOL 3-6%

IBU RANGE under 10

Background

The most ancient of all beer styles, lambics are fermented “spontaneously”—that is, the brewery-fresh wort is left in a shallow pool so that wild, airborne yeasts can inoculate it. The methods may be rudimentary, but many beer fans consider lambics the most complex beers in the world.

Flavor and aroma

Lambics are above all sour, but their character has a wide sweep of flavors, from a sharp, vinegary sour to tartly acidic to an austere, almost dusty sour. When fruit is added, these compounds often preserve the aroma perfectly and remove all sugars, leaving the essence of the fruit behind.

Character

The beer of each lambic brewery in the world is different because the native yeasts that ferment each beer differ. Until the past decade, all were located in one small region of Belgium, but lately Americans have gotten in on the act. There are several types of lambics. Straight lambics are single-batch beers. Gueuze (pronounced gooz-ah) is a blend of young and old lambics and is effervescent and less sour than straight lambic. Fruit lambics are made with additions of a wide variety of different fruits, but the most common are kriek (cherries) and framboise (raspberries).

Blind Tasting Idea

Tasting lambics or gueuzes from different breweries is an amazing study in wild yeasts. Add a fruit lambic or two for contrast.

Belgian Red and Brown Ales

COLOR burnished red to chestnut

ALCOHOL 5-8%

IBU RANGE 5-20

Background

Two similar styles of beer come from East and West Flanders in Belgium. Both are reddish-brown ales, but the beers of East Flanders, known sometimes as “oud bruins,” are rounder, sweeter, and more malty. The West Flanders beers, sometimes called Flanders red, are more tart and vinous.

Flavor and aroma

The brown ales are a balance of sweet and sour, with a malty foundation. Red ales, by contrast, are far sharper, and their vinous character is so pronounced that they’re known as the “burgundies of Belgium.”

Character

Although the two styles have much in common, brown ales have a rustic homeyness to them; they’re approachable and warm and satisfy like comfort food. Their red cousins are refined, sophisticated, and perhaps just a bit haughty—enough, almost, to satisfy oenophiles.

Blind Tasting Idea

Compare a flight of reds and browns and throw in a lambic for comparison.

American Wild Ales

COLOR Full spectrum, including vivid fruit colors

ALCOHOL 4-12%

IBU RANGE 5-20

Background

American breweries have only seriously embraced sour ales within the past decade, but they have done so with gusto. Americans have produced all the traditional sours—including lambics—and delved into fusion beers with no recognized style.

Flavor and aroma

The principle difference between American sours and their European inspirations is strength: Americans brew more alcoholic beers, which heightens the sense of richness and depth.

Character

Americans appreciate boldness in their beer, whether from hops or alcohol, so it's not surprising to find big sours across the country. Many brewers celebrate the local fruit bounty, and sours now reflect locality, from Columbia River apricots to Wisconsin's Door County cherries to Maine blueberries.

Blind Tasting Idea

Compare American sours with comparable European styles or against themselves as a way of surveying the breadth of the growing field.



FOOD AND BEER

Don't listen to the restaurateurs, ignore the wine critics, pay no mind to the sommeliers: The scandalous truth is that beer, with its enormous range of flavors and textures, is a far more versatile partner for the world's cuisines than wine is. Wine is made with a sole ingredient and has a necessarily limited range. But beer picks up flavor and aroma cues from its many ingredients, and it can offer pairings with almost any food. Moreover, adding food enhances the experience of sipping beer. When pint and plate are paired in the right combinations, the ingredients in the two perform an act of alchemy in the mouth and become a third thing entirely. Beer is lovely on its own; add a dish or two, and you may well find transcendence.

A PAIRING PRIMER

Beer's amazing range is unquestionably its virtue on the dinner table, but selecting from among the dozens of styles can also make it seem like a curse. The key is to make sure flavor elements work together. This doesn't necessarily mean matching similar flavors. In fact, one handy guide is deploying the "three Cs": cut, complement, or contrast. Some dishes lend themselves to complementary flavors, like sweet with sweet and smoky with smoky. Other dishes sing when the flavors contrast, like sweet and sour or fruity and spicy. Finally, some dishes are extreme—they're rich with cream or fiery with pepper—and with these, beers that cut through work wonders.

The best way to match flavors is to experiment, but a few basic tips may be handy.

Avoid imbalances. Very intense flavors can overwhelm milder flavors; make sure both halves of the equation match up. So, for light fish dishes, try pilsner; with barbecue, a hearty bock.

Consider carbonation. Flavors and aromas aren't the only factors to consider; higher carbonation is useful in cutting richness. Try an effervescent saison with foods like spaghetti carbonara. (Saison is the go-to beer in any case. Goes with anything!)

Beware the bitter. Many people love intensely hoppy, bitter beers, but these beers are hard to match with food. The bitterness overwhelms all but the most intense entrées, and they can actually accentuate spice. But all is not lost—hoppy beers do nicely with cheeses, particularly sharp blues, and citrusy examples may even work in the dessert course.

Don't forget dessert. Many people overlook one of the strongest pairing opportunities—dessert. With notes of caramel, fruit, tartness, or chocolate, many beers are perfect with final courses. Stouts are perfect with chocolate, and lambics are heavenly with fruit.

Not all tastings have to be blind. Enjoying a well-matched beer with different courses of food is one of the best ways to unlock a beer's secrets. Beer dinner parties offer myriad opportunities for exploration. Theme nights, matching a regional cuisine with its respective beer styles, holiday celebrations—the choices are almost unlimited.

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