

A TASTER'S GUIDE  
*to Brews That Improve over Time*

# VINTAGE BEER

**IDENTIFY**

*the changing flavors  
in beer as it ages*

**EXPLORE**

*tasting notes for  
classic vintage beers*

**UNDERSTAND**

*what indicates good  
aging potential*

**STOCK**

*and organize your  
beer cellar*



PATRICK DAWSON



VINTAGE  
BEER





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*A Taster's Guide to Brews That Improve over Time*

**PATRICK DAWSON**



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## DEDICATION

For my wife, Lindsey, whose incredible example has  
inspired me in everything I do. Her encouragement  
and support made this book a reality.



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## **“You cellar and drink 10-year-old beers? Are you crazy?”**

I can't tell you how many times over the last three decades I have had people ask me this very question. Well, the answer is: I'm not crazy, and neither are the legions of beer fans who have started aging beers. Of course, I'm not talking about those fizzy, yellow, lowest-common-denominator beers. You know — the ones where the cans change color when the beer is cold enough. Sometimes they're sold in 30-packs. I'm talking about craft beer, made with the best ingredients; if adjuncts are added, they are there to enhance the flavor, not lighten it. Even among these craft beers, less than five percent of everything produced is appropriate for aging. Most are meant to be consumed as fresh as possible, whether they are hazy IPAs, cloudy hefeweizens, or crisp, well-crafted pilsners. The styles you will find in this book are beers that can age like a fine wine — old ales, imperial stouts, gummies, Belgian quads, and many more.

I've been aging beers since the late seventies; my cellar has included 2,500 beers for the last 25 years. I've either written or been interviewed for a number of articles on the subject. It became my obsession to travel the world, meet like-minded individuals, and discuss the principles of aging beer over glasses of vintage ales and lagers too numerous to count. During those trips I've sampled nineteenth-century English ales and 30-year-old lambics.

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I've held vertical tastings of Thomas Hardy's Ale from 1968 through 2001. Sometimes the vintage beers are amazing, and sometimes they're well past their prime. One thing they have all held in common for me was the excitement of opening the bottle and smelling and tasting a bit of history.

Over the last five years there have been a growing number of websites and forums out there on the Internet that feature supposed experts claiming to know everything there is to know about aging beers. Some are better than others, but all are lacking a complete knowledge of the subject. Not until I met Patrick Dawson, a few years ago, had I found someone with enough determination, passion, and will to research the subject so completely as to be able to write the seminal book on aging beers. *Vintage Beer* will take you on a journey that includes identifying the correct beers to age, understanding the aging process, creating your own cellar, and finally, enjoying the fruits of your labor. Discover the aroma and flavor nuances that can be found in a well-aged beer.

"Dr." Bill Sysak  
Craft Beer Ambassador  
Stone Brewing Co.



# The World of Vintage Beer

**F**irst things first, grab a beer and settle in. I firmly believe that when you're reading and learning about beer, you should be drinking and experiencing beer. It's a truly beautiful cerebral-sensory experience. Okay, continue.

It had been a long night of drinking. I wasn't long out of college, but the late-night beer binges were already beginning to wear on me. I was at a point in my life where I was starting to opt for quality over quantity, and while taking a swig in the wee hours I would find myself thinking about how I was going to feel the next day rather than what I should drink next. My homebrew club's meeting was reaching one of those epic nights that always seemed to happen in December when everyone was more excited about drinking "just one more" beer rather than facing the snowy, cold walk home I'd had enough, though, and was just announcing that I was heading out when the host insisted I stay since she was going to open something special.

That month's meeting host, Maggie, worked at one of the best new wine stores in town, Mondo Vino, but her true passion was beer. Before discovering this shop, I had been choosing what I thought were exotic imports, like Dos Equis and Heineken, over Coors Light and fancied myself quite the beer snob. The first time I walked into the store, though, she quickly

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put me in my place in just about every aspect of beer (not that that was very hard to do at the time). I credit her with helping to push me onto the path of seeking and appreciating truly good beer. Anyway, years later, experience told me that when Maggie was excited about a beer, it was well worthwhile to sit back and wait for your glass to be filled. So when she announced that,

**What greeted my nose when I lifted that glass was something that I will always remember.**

as a Christmas gift, her boss had given her a magnum of Duvel that, she added triumphantly, “had been aged for three years!” I was more than a little flabbergasted.

Now, I had vague notions of aged beers, but they were, in my mind, dusty little bottles of British beers that, I figured, people kept more for their collectability than for there being anything particularly special in them. I just couldn’t comprehend why anyone would take a world-class brew like Duvel and ruin it by letting it get skunky and flat. And an entire magnum at that! Fighting the urge to roll my eyes, I proffered my glass and decided the high ABV (alcohol by volume) would at least keep me warm on the walk home.

What greeted my nose when I lifted that glass was something that I will always remember. Overwhelmed by the complex bouquet of fruit aromas, I struggled to pinpoint all that I was taking in. There was grape, pineapple, and maybe even a little kiwi in there. In a young Duvel, they’re in the background and overshadowed by the hop profile, but in the aged beer they burst to the front in a vibrant sweetness. I wanted to shrink myself down and spend the rest of my life in that glass. How had this happened? Convinced that any flavor had disappeared into the potent aroma, I took a sip still expecting to taste a stale old beer.

What I encountered instead was a slight caramel sweetness that played off the beer’s crisp acidity, and I was surprised that the alcohol heat had disappeared. I was astounded. All my experience up to that point, albeit limited, had taught me that beer was a beverage that was meant to be drunk fresh. That was why you got beer from the brewery. That was why you always



The prominent alcohol nose of certain beers fades after a few years, allowing the beer to develop complexities.

Two excellent beers that taste best at opposite ends of the aging spectrum: Hopslam should be drunk fresh, and Thomas Hardy's Ale should be aged as long as patience allows.



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checked the expiration date. My world was turned upside down. I had been doing it all wrong!

The years that followed were interesting, to say the least. I became obsessed with aging beer. I adopted the logic that all beer must get better over time. I figured that if wine improved with age, so would beer. (I found out later that not all wines improve with age.) I waited as patiently as I could for my bottles to turn into something like the heavenly nectar I had tasted that night.

With only a few exceptions, the results were disastrous. I would triumphantly pull five-year-old bottles of Fat Tire from the cellar expecting a masterpiece, only to end up with an overly sweet beer with weird off-tastes. The hops that I love so much in an IPA (India pale ale) were all but gone, leaving a thin malty mess. All my cherished beers came out tasting like wet cardboard — it was heartbreaking. Each one of those beers had become a little friend I was eagerly waiting to meet again, and they were all ruined. Nonetheless, I did end up with a few beers that were intriguing enough to make me want to continue the experiment — but only after I knew what I was doing.

**My early cellaring results were mostly disastrous.**

Not that there is a wealth of information out there now (which is probably why you're reading this), but back then there was absolutely no information about aging beer. There was no beeradvocate.com Cellaring/Aging Beer forum. There was word-of-mouth and experimentation, and that was about it. So I asked. A lot. I put questions to anyone who would listen. I talked to brewers to try to find out what they did differently when planning a vintage brew. I found other hobbyists who aged beer and learned from their experiences. I traveled to Europe again and again and drank some of the great vintages those amazing geniuses had had the foresight to hoard decades ago.

What I eventually found out is that every beer is highly time dependent. Each beer has a “window” in which it can really shine. Finding that window takes a critical review of a beer's current qualities and the knowledge of how they (might) change. What you have to keep in mind, though, something it took me a while to figure out, is that everyone's optimal window is different,



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and it requires knowing what you are looking for in a beer. Some people may find that they love the spicy yeast notes that stand out in a Schneider Aventinus wheat doppelbock at around one year of age, while others will prefer how those flavors suggest vanilla at the four-year mark.

When critically reviewing the qualities of a beer over time, what most people find is that many beers' optimal time frame is as fresh as possible, while a small minority of beers benefit from a couple of months to a year of aging. There are only a select few that fall into the category of benefiting from multiple years of cellaring. I would put the number at something like 1 percent of all craft beers currently being brewed. When considering this optimal time frame, most will find that a two-week-old Bell's Hopslam double IPA is on a par with a 20-year-old vintage Thomas Hardy's Ale barley wine in the sense that they're both world-class brews being consumed at their peak ages.

So you might ask, why go to the trouble of aging beer? Well, the answer is very simple: aging beer allows time for various flavors not immediately present to develop and meld. With experience and knowledge, your nose and tongue learn to detect different aromatic and taste aspects in a beer and

**Aging beer allows time for various flavors not immediately present to develop and meld.**

judge whether changes in them would make the beer more enjoyable. This book gives you the background knowledge you need to get started. As for the experience, well, that work is up to you alone, so start those arm curls.

What, then, do you need to know for your analyses? First, we'll discuss the aspects that are paramount in determining whether a beer might be a good candidate for cellaring. We'll talk about traditional aging mechanisms. Many you may already know, such as how hop bitterness fades linearly over time, but others might be new to you. How, for instance, a harsh, boozy flavor in a young beer is actually a good thing if it's to be aged. All these mechanisms are presented in simple-to-follow "vintage beer rules."

Next on the agenda is an in-depth look at the reasons behind these rules. Many of you will immediately flip to the next chapter, and probably be no

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worse off for it. But you science types in the group can take pride in the fact that you will know that the boozy nose on your three-year-old North Coast Old Stock was replaced by a nutty sweetness because the fusel alcohols present transferred electrons to the malt melanoidins, creating aldehydes. The rest of you can just make a mental note and be happy it happened.

Once you have built a solid knowledge base, it will be time to start applying it to real-world experience and actually tasting these beers that you have been anxiously awaiting. Tasting techniques along with anticipated flavors and aromas and their expected change over time are discussed to help guide you through this experience.

Finally, what to look for when determining the best place and way to cellar your beers is taken up. Whether you live in a 500-square-foot studio apartment or in an off-the-grid cabin in the middle of nowhere, optimal cellar conditions can be achieved. In addition, this book gives you information on ways to manage and track your growing collection.

To help with the learning process, I've included an entire chapter listing some examples of common, yet exceptional, brews that are considered benchmarks for what their beer style can achieve with time. You'll find graphs that show flavor changes over time based on vertical tastings by a panel of experienced beer tasters. With only a glance at the page, you'll learn what took us years of patient trial to determine.

Don't want to wait years to be able to drink these vintage brews? At the back of the book there is information on some of the finest vintage-beer bars in the world, where you can, for a small premium, take a shortcut to tasting some of the beers you've read so much about. Be sure to thank the geniuses who had the foresight to cellar these beers years before.

So on with it! This book is all about time, and time is a-wasting! A few years from now, on a cold winter night when you're savoring that smooth, cherry-soaked, chocolaty, bread pudding-esque vintage bottle of Trappistes Rochefort 10 from your cellar, you'll thank me. I promise.



# The Aging Beer

**W**hat is wonderful about the aging of beer is the fact that the results are relatively repeatable. Year to year, or more appropriately batch to batch, variations in a beer are fairly minor (with the exception of wild or kritic styles), which enables an experienced beer connoisseur to have a fairly good idea of what the brew will do as it ages. Wine, on the other hand, is nature's roulette wheel, spinning out a completely different beverage every year. A wine's change is somewhat unpredictable and may, or may not, improve over time, but it will definitely not improve in the same way each year. Yet there are in the world countless private and commercial cellars stocked with wine, and not beer.

There are a few reasons that collectors choose wine over beer for their cellars. Possibly the most important factor is that, for a fermented beverage to age well, it needs to be made with top-quality ingredients and utmost care. Sadly, this is something that the brewing industry largely ignored in the not-so-distant past, opting to create bland, dull lagers instead of the rich barley wines and doppelbocks of yore. The wine industry, on the other hand, has continued to improve its product every year, making the most of technology and science in its pursuit of the highest possible quality. This difference is due mostly to the willingness of the average consumer to spend a considerably higher amount of money on wine than on beer. Beer has been viewed as a cheap, after-work quaff, not something to be savored

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and enjoyed with a meal. Luckily, times have changed, and people are now spending more on beer in return for a better product, which has persuaded brewers to produce better and better beers every year.

With this new wave of brews have come many that, though good or even great fresh, show the potential to get even better with age. But why is that, many will ask. There are several reasons. Some beers just need a little time to meld, much like letting a stew sit overnight to bring the flavors together. Others need time to allow some of their initial harsh flavors (booziness, for example) to take on a more complementary, enjoyable character. The main reason, however, is to give new flavors a chance to emerge. These flavors can sometimes take years to surface, but they're capable of elevating many already great beers to a level vying with the finest vintage wines, and at a fraction of the cost.

So, how do you know how a beer might age? What flavors might emerge? Which aspects will mellow and integrate? What else do you need to watch out for? Yes, there are a lot of questions out there. So many, in fact, that I think the best way to start answering them is to begin with some general guidelines to help you form a picture of a beer that will age well. Give the following fourteen "rules" a read, and you'll begin to understand what's most important when choosing and developing vintage beers. If you still find yourself asking why, the next chapter takes up in depth the apparent mysteries of aging beer.

## VINTAGE BEER RULES

**RULE No. 1: Unless the beer is smoked or sour, the alcohol content should be at least 8 percent ABV.**

Alcohol acts as a preservative, slowing the effects of aging and buying time for those pleasant matured flavors to surface. Sour and smoked beers are exceptions because they have other preservatives (lactic acid and smoke phenols) to take the place of high alcohol content.

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**RULE No. 2: A beer's booziness eventually mellows and creates new, aging-derived flavors.**

The fusel alcohols so harsh in many fresh high-ABV beers mellow over time and develop a wide variety of new flavors, ranging from sweet (toffee and caramel) to fruity (apricot and grape).

**RULE No. 3: Darker malts create sherry and port flavors with age.**

This point is key since sherry and port flavors are crucial aspects of the successful aging of many beers. Amber-colored beers develop sweet, sherrylike notes, while stouts, with their initial highly roasted flavors, turn chocolaty and portlike.



Because of its smoked malt, Alaskan Brewing Company's Smoked Porter ages well despite a 6.5 percent ABV.

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**RULE No. 4: Malt proteins drop out, causing a beer's body to slowly thin.**

The loss of malt proteins and thinning of a beer's body is usually a disadvantage, so ageable beers should be very full-bodied up front. In the first few years of aging, some beers seem to thicken and become syrupy, but this actually indicates the emergence of new, sweet-tasting flavors (from aging alcohols) rather than an increase in a beer's viscosity.

**RULE No. 5: Cloudy wheat proteins fall out quickly (after six months or so), leaving a clear, thinner beer.**

Because of a tendency to lose a crucial component of their overall makeup, wheat beers, unless they have other aspects to help them age well, don't make good candidates for cellaring. Wheat beers are also often high in lipids, which create stale flavors as they age.



Very old beers can pour chunks of coagulated proteins that have formed in the bottom of the bottle.

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**RULE No. 6: Hoppiness fades over time and leaves behind either good or bad flavors, depending on the type of hops used.**

Hops, which are so integral to many beers, slowly lose their effects with the passage of time. This applies to hop bitterness as well as to hop flavors and aromas. As they disappear, new flavors can appear in their place. American hops, which are high in alpha acids, often leave behind stale, papery flavors that can ruin a beer. Because of this, many beers, like IPAs, don't age well. On the other hand, European hops, high in beta acids, maintain their bitterness much longer over time and can even introduce enjoyable, fruity flavors suggestive of pineapple, cherry, or even wine.

**RULE No. 7: Fruity yeast esters are volatile and change over time.**

Given a few years, the tree-fruit esters (apple, pear, apricots) found in many Belgian and English-style beers will develop into dried-fruit flavors (raisin, fig, date). The banana-like esters typical of German wheat beers tend to fade and disappear quickly. Esters produced by certain strains of *Brettanomyces* (a genus of yeast, often abbreviated as "brett") are slow to develop but can create floral, pineapple, and grapefruit notes that are surprisingly resilient.

**RULE No. 8: Spicy yeast phenols (pepper, clove, and smoke) develop into vanilla, leather, and tobacco flavors when aged.**

The earthy flavors associated with the yeast phenols characteristic of many Belgian beers (and some German wheat beers) can develop into unique, complex flavors attainable only through patient cellaring. The smoky aspects of rauchbiers age similarly.

**RULE No. 9: Oak-derived flavors from wood or barrel aging stay fairly constant over time.**

A rare consistent aspect of vintage beer, oak flavors sometimes become overwhelming as the other flavors "tighten" with age. Although slowly, changes do occur as the vanilla flavors eventually disappear and the cinnamon notes increase. Coconut maintains a steady presence.



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