

BEER STYLES

by Tim Vandergrift



Endless Opportunities for Adventure

"Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy."

- Benjamin Franklin

Most of the time spent on beverage education relates to the mysteries of wine, with short detours into spirits and (usually) a perfunctory discussion of beer, describing the differences between ale and lager and beer colours. Many beverage licensees work to educate themselves, their staff and their customers on the importance of wine and food pairing, regions, varietals, and styles, but rarely get more than a couple of educational opportunities on beer.

Taking beer out of our educational efforts leaves an opportunity on the table: beer is the oldest and most widely consumed alcoholic beverage, and beer sales are four times as great as wine sales. In fact, it's the #3 drink on the planet, after water and tea. The oldest known piece of writing on Earth is a brewer's recipe for beer, written on clay tablets over 3,500 years ago by the Babylonians. Finland's mythopoetic epic, the *Kalevala*, takes 200 verses to describe the creation of earth, but needs more than 400 to describe the creation of beer! That's a lot of history and dedication to the topic.

Beer also has more opportunities for food pairings than wine (for instance, beer almost always goes better with cheese than wine), and for people who say that they don't like beer, there are hundreds of different styles and tens of thousands



of brands: they just haven't tried the right beer - yet. By educating ourselves about different styles, we can help our consumers choose the beer that will keep them coming back to us as their expert.

Beer Basics

Beer is almost always more than 95% water by volume and includes a fermentable starch that can be converted into alcohol by yeast. Most of the starches are grains like malted barley, wheat, rice, corn or sugar, but can also come from surprising sources like millet, potatoes, agave (cactus pulp), or even cassava! This means that Japanese saké is actually rice *beer*, not rice wine.

Flavour agents such as hops are also included in most beers, to provide a bitterness to balance any sweetness. Hops also help with head retention, increasing the time the creamy foam stays on top of a poured beer, and helping to deter spoilage. The best way to think of hops is like chilli peppers: a little heat can balance the sweetness of a dish, but not everyone likes their food very spicy, and many

An advertisement for Lighthouse Brewing Company's Figgard 150 Bavarian Lager. On the left is a tall glass of beer with a thick head of foam. In the center is a green and black logo featuring a lighthouse and the text "Lighthouse Brewing Company" and "Figgard 150 Bavarian Lager". On the right is a grey box with white text.

Brewed to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Figgard lighthouse, Western Canada's first. A testament to the endurance of quality and tradition.

Figgard 150 is made using the finest ingredients, with an extra conditioning period to ensure a crisp, refreshing, premium quality taste, a tradition that never goes out of style.

people find very hoppy beers too bitter for their taste, while others become accustomed to highly hopped beers and begin to seek out a more intense experience (see IPA, below).

Other flavour agents are used in some styles, including fruit, spices, aromatic herbs, or even heather flowers in the case of Scottish Fraoch ale.

Beyond this broad outline, beer is split down the middle by the categories of lager and ale. Most of the time the shortcut has been to label ale “top-fermented” and lager “bottom-fermented”, from observations about the mass of yeast in the beer. While a picturesque bit of shorthand, it’s completely false. Yeast on the bottom or top of a beer isn’t doing any fermentation work - all beer is actually “middle fermented”.

The real distinction between the two beers is the temperature at which the yeast can comfortably work, and the different character the yeast gives to the finished beer. Lager yeast generally ferments much cooler, 7-12 °C. This reduces the amount of fruity, aromatic esters that the yeast produces, giving a “cleaner” taste to the beer, which allows the grain and hop characters to show through more fully. In addition, lagers typically go through a long secondary fermentation, often at 0-4 °C where they become brilliantly clear and the yeast converts almost all of the starches and sugars in to alcohol, leaving the beer dryer and crisper.

Ale yeast typically ferments at 15-24°C. At this temperature the yeast ferments much faster, usually leaving behind slightly more sugar than lagers (resulting in a sweeter, more full-bodied beer) and produces copious amounts of esters, giving aromas of bananas, apple, pears, and many others.

Style Guidelines

Styles provide a sort of shorthand for discussing beer, a common framework and language to accurately describe and analyze the beers’ character. Who gets to decide what defines a beer style? Wine styles are defined by government regulation in most countries, or vetted by industry associations such as VQA in Canada. Beer styles are virtually unregulated, so there can be a lot of variation in what people commonly define as a single style.

There are a number of useful guides available that help categorize different beer styles, and there is one source that rises above the others: the *Beer Judge Certification Program Style Guidelines*. Established in 1985, the BJCP was organised to promote beer literacy and has tested and certified over 2,500 judges. They developed a specific guide to give structure to beer judging, so

that contests could be conducted fairly, instead of solely on the basis of a judge’s preference. Although it lists 23 styles of beer and 79 sub-styles, it doesn’t claim to be completely inclusive, nor “the law”, merely that it provides “description rather than decree” for brewers and drinkers to speak a common language. A copy of the guidelines can be found at www.bjcp.org/stylecenter.php.

Styles in BC

For most consumers being offered a choice of less than a dozen beers at any establishment, it can come as a surprise that the BCLDB offers over 500 different beers. Of course, there are many repeats in that number, and more than 60% are produced by large-scale domestic breweries, but within it are dozens of flavourful, historic, exciting, obscure, and delicious beers. The length of this article doesn’t permit discussion of all of them, but here are a few styles you can encourage your customers to try.

Belgian-style Beers



The most exciting and dedicated brewing country on earth, Belgium has the most diverse set of beer styles of any country. It has 125 breweries producing nearly 9,000 different beers, and every year Belgians drink 93 litres of beer per capita - compare that to the 68 litres Canadians drink! The diversity of styles and the quality of the beers also lend themselves to imitation, and there are many Belgian-style beers produced outside of that country.

Belgian ales cover a lot of ground: Belgian golden strong ale with a pale, lager-like yellow colour and dense, rocky head (looking almost like cauliflower sitting on top of the beer) smells of pears and apples with a spicy-perfumey nose and a crisp finish. Duvel is a great example of this beer, and remarkably easy to drink despite its high alcohol content (8.5% ABV).

Belgian strong ales come in blonde, dubbel and tripel, each getting stronger and more intensely fruity and spicy as you go. An excellent example in this style is Karmeliet Tripel, with a deep gold colour, peppery/clovey/spicy nose with citrus and banana esters, and finish rounded with malt flavour and gentle hops. Locally, Phillips Brewing makes a Belgian tripel and Quebec’s Unibroue makes Eau Benite, a tripel-style ale, and Don de Dieu a strong pale ale.

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Some inspiring specialties are also available: Driftwood brewing makes a Belgian sour beer infused with peppercorns that is tart, spicy and complex, and a natural for braising meats.

White beer is a pale, cloudy wheat beer infused with coriander and orange. Originating in Belgium, this style had died out until it was revived by Pierre Celis with Hoegaarden (pronounced “who-garden”), which is still considered the classic example. Spicy, slightly sweet with a dense mousse-like head, this beer is sometimes served with a slice of orange. Canadian examples abound, including Driftwood’s White Bark, Molson’s Rickards Original White, and Unibroue’s Blanche de Chambly, along with Erdinger Weissbier, Wittekerke Wit Bier, and Estrella Damm Inedit. Try these beers with shellfish or Edam cheese.

One Belgian speciality style gets more attention than others: fruit beers. Belgians have a long history of taking their favourite beer and blending in fresh fruit, a tradition that helped make use of surplus fruit during harvest. The best-known style is Lambic, in which an intensely sour base beer called “Gueze” is mixed with fresh fruit, usually cherries, raspberries, peaches, black currants, apples, or even strawberries. It’s a pity this style isn’t better known, as it’s the perfect introduction to beer for people who don’t like beer. Tart, with sweet fruit notes, most first-time drinkers mistake it for fantastically good soda pop rather than beer. Lindeman’s Framboise is a raspberry lambic, offering a magnificent aroma and flavour balanced by the subtle, tart complexity of lambic fermentation. St. Louis Premium Kriek is a cherry Lambic, ruby coloured with a pale pink head and balanced sweetness. Good on its own, it’s also marvellous poured over vanilla ice cream, for an adult float.

Other Belgian fruit styles include Fruli Strawberry Beer, a high quality white beer blended with pure strawberry juice that has been described as a “strawberry smoothie with a bite.” Ultramour, a pale ale with raspberries, is also very refreshing. Echt Kriekenbier, from Brouwerij Verhaeghe is another sour ale infused with crushed sour cherries and a palate of vanilla notes, cherries, passionfruit, with a crisp finish.



Stout and Porter

The distinction is a bit subtle for the beginning drinker, but Porters tend to be substantial English-style dark ales with roasted grain notes and varying levels of malt sweetness and hops. Examples in BC include Saltspring Island Porter, Okanagan Spring Old English Porter, Tree Brewing Spy Porter, and Whistler Black Tusk Ale. Medium to dark brown, but never completely black, porter shows ruby highlights and a sharp coffee-ish nose and usually has a creamy, tan-coloured head. It’s brilliant with smoked meats and fish.

Stouts descended from Porter, but were usually intended to be stronger (stout being the British idiom for strong, hearty and robust). The most famous example is Guinness, which falls under the heading of “Dry Stout”. While some consider it heavy or too potent, Guinness actually qualifies as a light beer, with fewer carbohydrates (and less calories) than skim milk and an alcohol content of only 4.2%! Jet black, with a light tan head and a roasted grain/chocolate/cocoa aroma, it has a creamy mouthfeel and dry finish, making it superb with raw oysters or even with a scoop of vanilla ice cream floating in it. Local examples of dry stout include R&B Brewing Dark Star Oatmeal Stout, Mt. Begbie Selkirk Stout, Lighthouse Keepers Stout, and Nelson Blackheart Oatmeal Stout.

Sweet stouts are more robust, higher in alcohol and have been described as tasting like sweetened espresso. In this category are English stouts, like Old Yale Sasquatch Stout and North Coast Old Rasputin Russian Imperial Stout, the latter being more like espresso with a shot of bourbon in it. With 9% ABV and a complex aroma of bitter chocolate, roast grains, raisins, prunes, liquorice and toast, it pairs well with chocolate cake or plum pudding.


Affligem Blond Abbey Ale 30L Kegs +069567	De Koninck 30L Kegs +331181	Delirium Tremens 30L Kegs +812024	Erdinger Weissbier 500ml bitl +402230	Fruli Strawberry Beer 30L Kegs +763698	Marston's Pedigree Coming Soon!	Stiegl Lager 500ml can +521468

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India Pale Ale

IPA is a beer of very certain history and style: a strong beer with deep amber to copper colour, balanced sweetness from malt, and fruity characters balanced by very high rates of both hop bitterness and hop flavour and aroma. Unfortunately, the term IPA has been attached to beers that are really mild ales. However, there are a number of specialty producers in BC that make excellent IPA, some balanced, others wild and woolly with intense flavours. Balanced examples include R&B Brewing Hoppleganger, Spinnakers IPA, Saltspring Island IPA, Alexander Keith's IPA, and Granville Island Brockton IPA; beers that have rich character but can be consumed as a "session beer", and enjoyed with typical pub fare of burgers or meat pies.

More potent examples include Phillips Amnesiac Double IPA, Nelson Paddywhack IPA, Old Yale Sergeants IPA, Dogfish Head 60 Minute IPA, and one of the best IPAs in the country, Central City Brewing's IPA (voted CAMRA's best beer in BC). These beers are high in alcohol and fruity esters, and are usually extremely hoppy, with highly floral aromas supplementing the citrus/apple/pear fruit character and enormous bitterness in the finish that can leave some drinkers overwhelmed, but others addicted - just like the hot pepper example given in the beginning.

Dunkel



All of the examples to this point have been ales, partly because most people are already familiar with Canada's domestic lagers, and even examples of European lagers like DAB, Heineken, Kulmbacher Dortmund Export, and Okanagan Spring 1516 have wide exposure. But Dunkel is a horse of a different colour: it's a *black* lager, made with roasted barley malt, combining a smooth, malty flavour and hints of nutty toastiness with the crisp finish of a lager. Okanagan Spring Dark Lager, Vancouver Island Hermann's Dar, and Jacobsen Original Dark Lager are good examples.

Bock

Bock is another lager that is similar to Dunkel, but it has a maltier, sweeter finish. Doppelbock is higher in alcohol, very full-bodied, and has an intense malty sweetness, and Eisbock is much like the eponymous German Eiswein. Made by partial freeze concentration, this beer is sweet, very dark in colour, and has an extremely high alcohol content. Vancouver Island Hermannator Ice Bock is an example that's best served the same way as you would brandy or liqueur, sipped slowly by the fire.

Maibock is a strong lager that is pale or amber in colour, but has the same malty-sweet characteristics as the other Bock beers. Holsten Festbock and Rogue Dead Guy Ale are two excellent examples. They go quite well with spicy foods like pepperoni pizza.

There are dozens more styles to explore and taste. Light lager beers are excellent thirst quenchers and very refreshing, but a whole world of aroma, flavour, and food pairings await anyone wanting to stretch their beer education. As the famous British drinks writer, Michael Jackson once said, "Beer is a playground, not a prison". Hear, hear! ☺