

THE DRINKING MAN'S GUIDE TO THE WORLD'S BEST BEERS

There's more high-quality beer in America — and in your grocer's cooler — than ever before. Who could taste them all? For the fourth year in a row, we did our very best.

by CHRISTIAN DEBENEDETTI & SETH FLETCHER

photographs by DAN SAELINGER

The
Best Pale
Ales



HOW WE DID IT

We surveyed a Rolodex full of prominent beer industry players, asking them to name their favorite beers in several major categories, and tallied the results. Where our poll resulted in either (a) no consensus or (b) a tie, we selected the winning beer in a head-to-head tasting. And to keep things fair, anytime a brewer voted for his or her own beer, we tossed that vote.

PROVIDED IT'S NOT THE SHAKES THAT MAKES YOU reach for that cold one, there's never been a better time to be a beer drinker. Delicious craft beer — roughly and imperfectly defined as high-quality brew made in smallish batches from the best possible ingredients, instead of corn syrup and generic grain — is everywhere. The average American now lives within 15 miles of a brewery making a fresh,

local product. Imports from such beer-mad nations as Belgium and Norway previously unseen here are making their way into stores across the country. Even Anheuser-Busch wants in on the action; why else would the mega-brewer have released more than 85 experimental beers in the past two years? Which raises a fine question: What should you drink next? We canvassed brewers, importers, tavern-keepers, and chefs to find the best of the best.

1 FIRESTONE WALKER PALE ALE



To us, the humble pale ale is the true king of beers. These mild bronze "session" beers are designed for drinking all night long — which is exactly

how beer should be consumed. And for the second year, this substantial, sparkling ale beat all competitors in our tasting, mostly because of its incredible freshness. Take one whiff and you know it's something special; hops rarely smell this fresh. We could spend hours overanalyzing this stuff, puzzling out the connection between its wine country provenance and its delicate yet hearty flavor. But this isn't a beer that should be overthought. It should simply be consumed (firestonebeer.com).

2 SIERRA NEVADA

One of our testers put it best: "We're lucky to take this beer for granted."

3 MIRROR POND

Bend, Oregon's hometown brew, strong year after year.

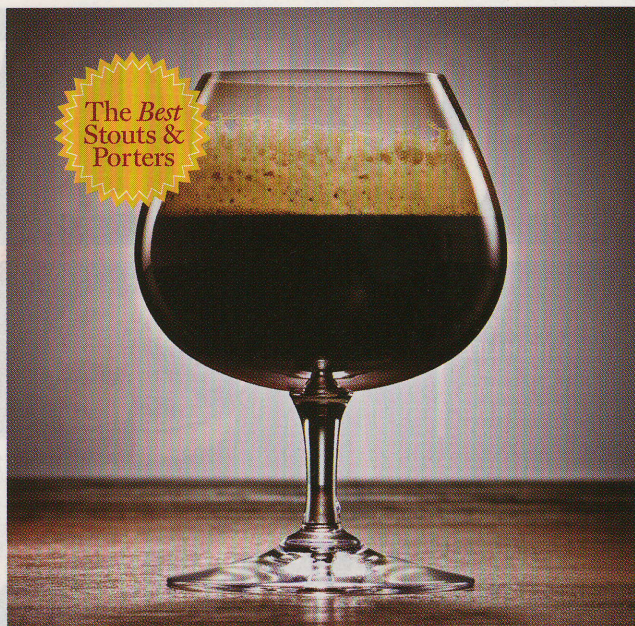
4 DOGFISH HEAD 60 MINUTE IPA

America's best India pale ale.

5 RIDGWAY BITTER

A mild, traditional British ale from a tiny U.K. microbrewery.

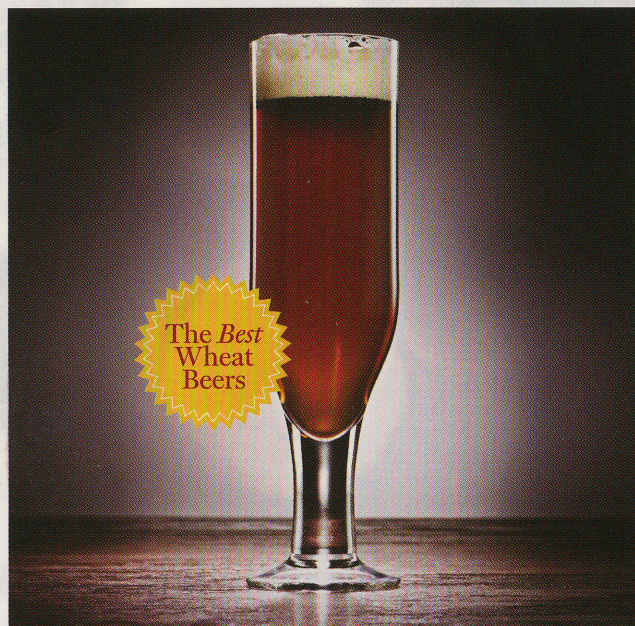
The Best
Stouts &
Porters



1 DESCHUTES THE ABYSS

As Solana Beach, California-based brewer and MJ panelist Tomme Arthur put it, a stout should have "flavor, balance, and, above all, a heart of darkness." The Abyss has all in abundance. It lives up to its melodramatic name with an onyx-black hue and mind-twisting 11 percent alcohol content, and aging in oak barrels brings traditional smoky stout flavors to new depths of richness (deschutesbrewery.com).

- 2 GUINNESS Yes, it's the ultimate macrobrew. But it's Guinness. Enough said.
- 3 STONE SMOKED PORTER Roasty, hoppy insanity from SoCal's finest brewers.
- 4 BELL'S KALAMAZOO STOUT A standout from a brewery specializing in stout.
- 5 BROOKLYN BLACK CHOCOLATE STOUT Dense, inky ale from NYC.



The Best
Wheat
Beers

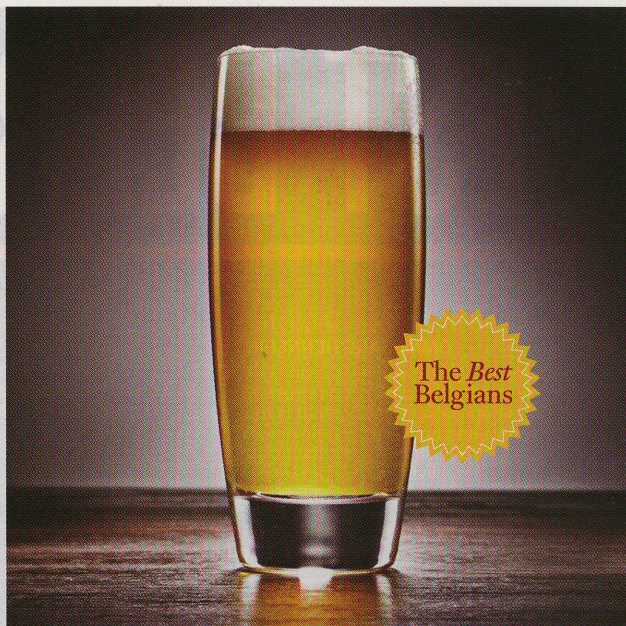
1 AVENTINUS DOPPEL WEIZEN-BOCK

Most wheat beers are served with a lemon and relegated to the task of getting sorority girls drunk. But real German *weizen* beers are bold, complicated ales replete with funky herbal aromas, chewy texture, and loads of flavor. Aventinus is the latter, brewed with roasted malts and a voracious yeast strain that cranks out distinctly unwheatlike depths of flavor and a deceptively high alcohol content (schneider-weisse.de).

- 2 AYINGER BRAU-WEISS The king of traditional summer-sipper wheat beers.
- 3 ALLAGASH WHITE An American white ale surpasses its old-world forebears.
- 4 PENN WEIZEN Authentic German brewing from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
- 5 WIDMER HEFEWEIZEN These days it's everywhere. Order when in doubt.



The Best
Belgians



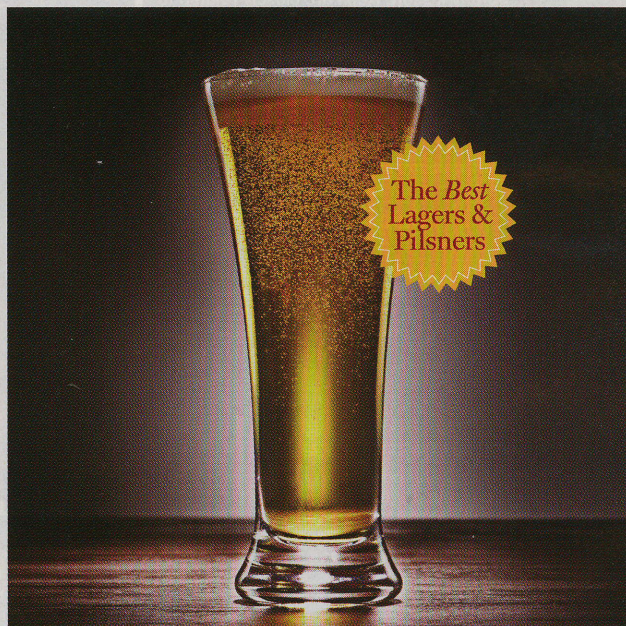
1 SAISON DUPONT

For many beer geeks the brewing center of the universe is the French-speaking region of Belgium called Wallonia, where brewers open the tanks during fermentation to let wild yeasts blow in and do their thing. The result is a rustic character that's nearly impossible to duplicate. Saison Dupont, which until recently was made on a farm that supplied eggs to the locals, embodies that quality perfectly (brasserie-dupont.com).

- 2 ROCHEFORT 10 A mind-boggling brew from revered Belgian masters.
- 3 OMMEGANG THREE PHILOSOPHERS An authentic Belgian brewed in the U.S.
- 4 RUSSIAN RIVER DAMNATION From California's finest Belgian-style brewers.
- 5 ST. BERNARDUS TRIPLE A subtly powerful "triple"-style ale.



The Best
Lagers &
Pilsners



1 LAGUNITAS PILS

When the heat index in your town is breaking records from the Dust Bowl days, you want a pilsner. This year Lagunitas's fine, bready beer, brewed in the Czech tradition that began in 1839 in the town of Pilsen, edged out perennial favorite Victory Prima Pils for pure refreshing goodness. It's as thirst-quenching as ice water, but with a bounty of flavor; as one taster put it, "crisp without being over-the-top with bitterness" (lagunitas.com).

- 2 VICTORY PRIMA PILS A standout hoppy pilsner year after year.
- 3 STOUT'S PILS With Victory, makes Pennsylvania the pils capital of America.
- 4 TRUMER PILS An Austrian recipe lovingly re-created in California.
- 5 NEW BELGIUM BLUE PADDLE The finest pils from Colorado ski-bum country.



BEST BEERS FOR EVERY

In Case of Natural Disaster

OMMEGANG HENNEPIN

When disaster strikes, you need a drink — preferably one that doesn't need refrigeration. But an apocalypse-black stout is too portentous, and bourbon's a little much. This cheery, strongish ale is just the ticket to oblivion (ommeegang.com).

For Ballpark Hecklers

MILLER HIGH LIFE

When you have a bottle of the "champagne of beers" in your hand, screaming at the third-base coach just seems like the right thing to do (millerhighlife.com).

Global-Warming Summer Beer

THIRIEZ XXTRA

Few European nations have been brutalized by heat waves quite as badly as France has. Fortunately, a small French brewery makes a bright ale perfect for a 100-degree afternoon at a cafe (sheltonbrothers.com).

Airport Layover Beer

SAMUEL ADAMS BOSTON LAGER

This malty, ubiquitous lager takes the edge off for thousands of delayed air travelers every day (samueladams.com).

Marijuana Substitute

DESCHUTES HOP TRIP

The Cypress Hill—concert aroma of this ultra-dry-hopped ale clearly illustrates a basic botany lesson: Hops are closely related to a certain illicit herb (deschutesbrewing.com).

Liquid Courage

STONE DOUBLE BASTARD

What? You calling me a bastard? I'll show you a bastard! (stonebrewing.com)

Mass Market "Microbrew"

BLUE MOON

"Let's call a spade a spade," one industry source said to us. The vaguely Belgian, coriander-spiced Blue Moon, now in every TGI-McApplebee's across the country, is a Coors product through and through (coors.com).

For an All-Nighter

NORTH COAST RED SEAL ALE

Perfect balance and pure quality have earned this pale ale 10 gold medals over the years, but the moderate alcohol content is what will keep you fully functional all night long (northcoastbrewing.com).

For a One-Nighter

CELEBRATOR DOPPELBOCK

The horse-shape charm dangling from the neck of this bottle is designed to make the stiff German bock more appealing to children. Not really. But you'd be surprised how well it works on women (celebrator.com).

Oktoberfest Beer

GREAT LAKES OKTOBERFEST

Hordes of cargo-shorted college kids mar the *gemütlichkeit* of nearly all Oktoberfest celebrations — which these days don't even serve true märzen, the traditional strong brown lager of the festival's past. Skip it and drink this beauty at home, with a brat (greatlakesbrewing.com).

For the Scotch Lover

LOST ABBEY ANGEL'S SHARE

"Angel's share" refers to the whiskey that evaporates as scotch settles and ages in oak casks. And this smoky, caramelly ale delivers the same sweet wood aromas so prized in a fine Highland malt (lostabbey.com).

Best with a Shot of Whiskey in It

HARP IRISH LAGER

The great Irish beer is Guinness, but the mediocre Harp Irish Lager can, in one easy step, be made into something we appreciate even more (diageo.ie/brands/harp).



OCCASION

"Best Beer" rankings rarely answer the most important question: What's the best beer for *right now*? Here's what to sneak into the ballpark, tow behind your canoe, drink in the morning, give to the babysitter (kidding!), and more.



Best "Light" Beer

MAHR'S LEICHT

Leave it to the Germans, who invented a light beer so diabetics could still drink, to create a low-calorie, low-carb beer that contains all the flavor that beer should (*sheltonbrothers.com*).

Best Before Noon

NORTH COAST SCRIMSHAW PILSNER

Unless you're getting off the graveyard shift, your morning beer should be mild. Scrimshaw is a tasty pilsner that's low enough in alcohol that you can have one at 11:59, almost completely guilt-free (*northcoastbrewing.com*).

With a Good Cigar

GOOSE ISLAND BOURBON COUNTY STOUT

Roasty and intense, but smooth like a velvet smoking jacket (*gooseisland.com*).

For the Goldman Sachs Broker

SAMUEL ADAMS UTOPIA

On what does the young mogul spend his bonus? Scotch is too predictable; vintage wine, too pretentious. This cognac-like concoction, which happens to be the strongest beer in the world, starts at \$160 a bottle and sells on eBay for more than \$300. For living large, and letting the whole world know about it (*samuelsadams.com*).

River Trip Beer

DALE'S PALE ALE

The dilemma: You can't bring bottles on the river, but most canned beer blows. The solution: Dale's Pale Ale, a full-flavored canned beer worthy of the fanciest bottle (*oskarblues.com*).

Hair-of-the-Dog Beer

SOUTHAMPTON DOUBLE WHITE

The stalwart Belgian *wit*, or "white" beer, is meant to be chugged in the morning. Seriously. And on a really bad morning, Southampton's amped-up twist on a Belgian white is sweet relief (*publick.com*).

Barbecue Beer

AECHT SCHLENKERLA HELLES

Rauchbier, or "smoke beer," is the traditional brew of Bamberg, Germany, where this unusual lager is made. Though the malts in this aren't smoked over peat the way the town's other beers are, the effect lingers, giving it a faint charcoal whiff. Ribs have met their match (*schlenkerla.de*).

To Impress a Beer Geek

CANTILLON LOU PEPE

Cantillon is the Wrigley Field of craft brewing: an atmospheric 100-year-old building in an old quarter of Brussels in which the air is filled with tradition — and wild yeasts, which work on the beers. Their "Lou Pepe," made with whole Schaarbeek cherries and aged for years, is tart, dry, complex, and completely beer-snob proof (*cantillon.be*).

For Ice Fishing

BROOKLYN BLACK CHOCOLATE STOUT

To keep you company on the ice, a beer needs two essential qualities: plenty of flavor to keep you entertained and plenty of alcohol to keep it from freezing. Brooklyn's boozy (8 percent), obsidian-colored stout delivers both (*brooklynbrewery.com*).

To Buy with Spare Change

PABST BLUE RIBBON

It's a hipster favorite because even "artists" can afford it, and because, surprisingly, it's a little better (notice that we are not calling it "good") than most other cheap stuff out there (*pabst.com*).

Only Decent Mexican Beer

NEGRA MODELO

The rumor that a certain amount of piss is allowed in each batch of Corona: Not true. But it might as well be (*gmodelo.com*).

Ski Town Beer

AVERY 14ER ESB

Okay, Boulder's not exactly a ski town, but this alpine-inspired brew contains just the right proportion of warming heft and malty flavor that après-ski festivities call for (*averybrewing.com*).

For the Earth-Firster

BUTTE CREEK ORGANIC PILSNER

It's organic and unfiltered, like an unwashed hippie. It's bready and grainy, like the rawest vegan granola. And it still tastes pretty goddamn great. Even your crunchiest friends will find no reason to boycott this one (*buttecreek.com*).