

25 BEST BEERS IN AMERICA

Two years ago we ranked the best beers in America. Since then the brewing scene has changed dramatically. Or at least that's the excuse we used to create an all-new list this year.

By christian debenedetti and seth fletcher

It's been years since anyone doubted that microbrews were more gourmet and complicated than the Buds, Millers, and Coors of the world. But as varied and tasty as micros are, there was a time some got, well, a little too interesting for their own good, sending many guys back to the cooler for something simpler, cleaner — a thirst-quencher, not a liquid meal. No longer. As this third annual survey revealed, American craft brewing has come of age. Adventuresome brewers are now producing beers that are at once mind-bendingly flavorful and perfectly refreshing on a hot afternoon. But don't take our word for it. We put this list together by gathering recommendations from the experts and carefully tasting case after case, on deadline. You, however, have all the Saturdays in the world. Think of this list as a scorecard, with points to debate and notes for inspiration. Which is to say, you've got some drinking to do.

1 - Firestone Walker Pale Ale

Paso Robles, CA

firestonebeer.com

You may recognize the name here, either from the Napa Valley winery or the tire company whose wealth spawned said winery. Well, the winery then spawned a little four-beer brewery, and that brewery has created the liveliest, purest expression of American pale ale going. Brewed with gentle British bittering hops and finished with American cascade hops (the same stuff that makes Sierra Nevada smell like pinecones), Firestone Walker combines the subtlety of a British ale with the fragrant bite that Americans weaned on microbrews have come to expect. The Burton Union oak barrel system, a Rube Goldbergian row of linked barrels that churn the fermenting brew through wood while it's coming of age, is more evidence that these guys are serious about tradition. If you've ever enjoyed a bottle of pale ale, we suggest you seek this one out. (See online sources on page 107.)

2 - Dogfish Head 60 Minute IPA

Milton, DE

dogfish.com

If Dogfish Head brewer Sam Calagione worked in a real lab somewhere, he'd probably be trying to engineer living organisms from scratch. Be glad he stuck to beer. His 18-percent alcohol, seemingly quaalude-based World Wide Stout is the beer that made him famous, but we're most impressed by his flagship brew, the 60 Minute IPA. IPA stands for India pale ale, a British style that is traditionally brewed with extra hops and a higher alcohol content, both of which helped preserve the ale on the long journey to the king's beer-guzzling troops in India. These days the bitter, boozy style is one of the most popular in the craft beer world, and 60 Minute IPA is the best we've found. It's almost as

if Calagione has found a way to strip the essential oils from hops, aromatherapy-style, and drop just a touch in each bottle to gain flavor while staying well below the threshold of unpleasant bitterness. The 60 Minute IPA accounts for nearly half of Dogfish's sales, a remarkable feat for an IPA, and one that speaks to its surprising drinkability.

3 - Stoudt's Pils

Adamstown, PA

stoudtsbeer.com

For the past two years we've declared Victory Prima Pils, from Downingtown, Pennsylvania's Victory Brewing Co., to be the Platonic ideal of an American pilsner: a straw-colored beer that's hoppier than its Bavarian and Czech forebears yet refreshing enough to sip immediately after a five-mile run. This year we've set aside Prima Pils to make way for something new: yet another pilsner from Pennsylvania, a state that should probably change its motto to "Land of the Righteous Pilsners." Stoudt's is the oldest craft brewery in the state, and its experience shows in this light, buttery brew, which is subtle and full-flavored enough to compete with the finest European pilsners.

4 - Russian River Temptation Ale

Santa Rosa, CA

russianriverbrewing.com

Aging beer in oak barrels might sound like the handiwork of poseurs, but it's a long-standing tradition in Europe, where certain storied British and Belgian brewers (Samuel Smith's and Marston's in England, Rodenbach and Cantillon in Belgium) still ferment with wood. In the right hands the result is a richness and winelike character that simply can't be had without the influence of wood. That's exactly what Russian River has accomplished with its Temptation, a Belgian-style blond ale aged in chardonnay barrels for a year and infused with a touch of *brettanomyces* bacteria (see number 21 for more on that). The aging and the addition of *brettanomyces* move Temptation beyond standard blond ale territory (sweet, estery, highly alcoholic) into the realm of something worth cellaring and saving for special occasions.

5 - Avery Mephistopheles' Stout

Boulder, CO

averybrewing.com

Diabolically strong at 15.1 percent, Boulder brewer Adam Avery's latest creation demands respect. Drink it for a glimpse of the awesome power a beer can unleash, but be careful: You may never be able to drink another stout. And not just because it's seductively potent. This cinder-black brew is rich and roasty, with flavors of coffee and rum-soaked black cherries, and a velvety smoothness lures you back for sip after sip. It's an ideal after-dinner drink, perfect with dark chocolate. But again: Consider yourself warned.

6 - Anderson Valley Boont Amber Ale

Boonville, CA

avbc.com

Too often the designation “amber” gets slapped onto any cloyingly sweet, ruddy-colored, half-assed ale that college sophomores love but beer geeks despise. Boont Amber shows what potential the style has: room for floral hops, melony aromas reminiscent of those found in the finest Belgian ales, and a round, full, sweet-malt body that doesn’t show a trace of the rotten-fruit sourness that can taint lesser amber ales.

7 - Great Lakes Holy Moses White Ale

Cleveland, OH

greatlakesbrewing.com

This variation on the Belgian wit, or white, beer, a light, frothy wheat-based style spiced with coriander and lemon peel, has a nice American twist. It’s dry-hopped, which lends a floral character that combines nicely with the coriander and chamomile — and believe it or not, you can taste the chamomile. The result is delicious, with the creamy citrus notes that are the mark of a good wit. This might all sound unforgivably girly to you, but try one on a warm spring day and you’ll beg for another.

8 - Full Sail Session Lager

Hood River, OR

fullsailbrewing.com

This new, wildly popular release seems an obvious homage to the sadly discontinued Olympia grenade bottles (“It’s the Water”). As with Oly, you can drink it all night long (“Session Lager” means “suitable for drinking for hours on end”). Unlike Oly, Session has real taste, which makes it all the more likely to lure you into that long night out.

9 - Rogue Brutal Bitter

Newport, OR

rogue.com

Rogue is one of the pioneers of the West Coast extreme beer scene, in which brewers take standard beer styles and add more: more hops, more malt, more alcohol. A lot of these beers have all the charm of fresh lead paint (Rogue’s absurdly overhopped Imperial IPA is a prime example). But despite the intimidating name, Brutal Bitter is not one of those beers. It’s a British “bitter,” a lightly hoppy ale that’s apparently shocking to the English palate but crisp and clean to American tongues. Of course, this bold, copper-colored bitter is amped up — it’s a Rogue, after all — but just to the point of ideal drinkability.

10 - Bell’s Expedition Stout

Comstock, MI

bellsbeer.com

Russian Imperial Stouts — ebony elixirs first brewed in England for export to Russian czars — tend to deliver an overwhelming malt assault. But despite being made with twice as much grain as Bell’s standard stout, Bell’s Expedition is surprisingly smooth. Not surprisingly, it’s potent, too, at 11.5 percent, though cocoa and dried fruit flavors balance the booze. This is one for savoring, preferably to toast the end of a long voyage.

11 - Southampton Double White

Southampton, NY
publick.com

In the new American “double” tradition — essentially shorthand for an extreme-beer variation on a well-known style, in this case the Belgian wit — Southampton brewmaster Phil Markowski has created Double White. It’s like a distilled Hoegaarden, with nearly twice the alcohol, 10 times the flavor, and a melted-gelato creaminess. On a hot day there are few beers more refreshing than a classic wit; this bolder variation is perfect for the cooler days of fall.

12 - Smuttynose Big A IPA

Portsmouth, NH
smuttynose.com

If anyone tells you that the quintessential American beer is Budweiser, here’s your reply: Every country in the world has its own bland lager. But no one else has the belligerent, uncouth, perfectly American double IPA. That description may be harsh, but this hyperhopped style most often is. This New Hampshire brewery’s interpretation, though, is actually drinkable, with a strong malt background to balance all those bitter hops. Smuttynose’s Shoals Pale Ale damn near made this list, but in the end we felt like its Big A IPA was one of the very few extreme beers we tried that really fulfilled the implicit promise these beers make: to deliver more of what you like without screwing it up.

13 - Penn Weizen

Pittsburgh, PA
pennbrew.com

The Bavarian wheat beer Weihenstephaner Weisse is arguably the brew by which all weizen, or wheat beers, are judged. And held to that standard, Penn Brewery’s weiss delivers, with the hazy, bright gold color, banana-bread aromas (which come from esters produced by the yeast), lemon- and orange-rind flavors, and general chuggability that make traditional German wheat beers perennial warm-weather favorites.

14 - Great Lakes Burning River Pale Ale

Cleveland, OH
greatlakesbrewery.com

“Burning River” is a great name; unfortunately it’s also a reference to the worst days of the Cuyahoga River, a waterway once so befouled by coal plants on its banks that it

periodically caught fire. Don't worry: This beer tastes nothing like an oil slick, flaming or no, though it is fuller, bolder, and more bitter than Firestone's pale, reaching toward IPA territory.

15 - Ommegang Hennepin

Cooperstown, NY
ommegang.com

Like many of the Belgian saison beers that inspired it, Hennepin comes in a wine-size bottle corked like champagne. Why? It's not just to impress the guests, which this beer would do even if it were poured into a hiking boot. This spicy summer sipper undergoes a second fermentation in the bottle, and the pressures created reach levels an ordinary metal cap can't withstand. And unlike a good bottle of bubbly, Hennepin won't set you back 70 bucks. Try \$7.

16 - Samuel Adams Black Lager

Boston, MA
samueladams.com

Next time your chardonnay-sipping in-law whines that "dark beers are just too heavy," explain that dark beers aren't necessarily heavier; sometimes they're just darker. The Black Lager from microbrewing trailblazer Jim Koch's Boston Beer Co. will finish your point. Inspired by the obsidian-colored schwarzbier ("black beer") from southeastern Germany, it's smooth and dark, but not too filling — a nice alternative to meal-in-a-glass stouts and porters.

17 - Sprecher Hefe Weiss

Milwaukee, WI
sprecherbrewery.com

Milwaukee was once called the Beer Capital of the World, thanks to its prowess in cranking out Pabst, Schlitz, and other monosyllabic canned beers that are now ironic hipster fashion accessories. Sprecher guards a more authentic strain of the city's brewing tradition with its perfectly crafted German-style beers, particularly its Hefe Weiss, which, with its substantial head, hazy body, big whiffs of esters, and muted citrus flavor, could have easily come from the Old Country.

18 - Alaskan Amber

Juneau, AK
alaskanbeer.com

This sturdy, malty beer is made in the style of German alt, or old, beers, which are fermented slowly and at lower temperatures than usual, resulting in an extraordinarily creamy smoothness. Like the best altbiers, Alaskan's is fresh-tasting and easy-drinking, but there's nothing really old about it — except the water, which comes from glacial runoff of the 3,000-year-old Juneau Ice Field.

19 - Deschutes Broken Top Bock

Bend, OR

deschutesbrewery.com

It's a common misconception that this German style is called "bock" because it's as "strong as a goat," "bock" being German for goat. The style is actually named after the town where it was born, Einbeck, but no matter. This expression of the style, named after a presumably goat-ridden volcanic remnant that soars nearly 10,000 feet over Deschutes's hometown of Bend, boasts rich, roasted malt flavors and tangy Eastern European hops. And at 7 percent alcohol, it has a kick even the local wildlife could appreciate.

20 - Lost Abbey Avant Garde

San Marcos, CA

lostabbey.com

Pizza Port brewing built a dedicated cult following with Belgian-style ales just as good as the stuff from across the pond. Now that they're trying to reach beyond the beer-blog obsessives, they've ditched the dorky "Pizza Port" name to become Lost Abbey.

Fortunately the beer is as good as ever. Their Avant Garde is our favorite; it's a bière de garde, meaning it's "guarded" for a long period of aging, during which it grows into a pleasantly warming ale marked by earthy, spicy flavors. Pair this bottle with strong cheese and crackers.

21 - Jolly Pumpkin Bam Bière

Dexter, MI

jollypumpkin.com

This one is an acquired taste. Like the Belgian classic Orval, Bam Bière contains a stout helping of *brettanomyces*, a bacterium considered a defect in most wines that's key to many Belgian standout beers. "Brett," as it's sometimes called, is often described as leathery or earthy (a flavor sometimes referred to as "horse blanket"); in this hazy golden ale those funky flavors are balanced by a pleasant citrus tang.

22 - Victory St. Victorious Doppelbock

Downington, PA

victorybeer.com

Pennsylvania's Victory Brewing Co. has blown us away in the past with its crisp, flowery Prima Pils, so we had high expectations for this traditional German-style Doppelbock before we even got a whiff of its toasty, spicy aroma. We weren't disappointed: caramely, chocolaty, slightly smoky, mahogany in color and bursting with roasted malt, this is a beer tailor-made for winter's cold nights.

23 Allagash Interlude

Portland, ME

allagash.com

This fine Maine-based brewery started as a one-man operation 11 years ago and has been crafting exceptional Belgian-style beers ever since. Its latest experiment is a series of oak-aged ales; our favorite is Interlude, which starts life something like a Belgian triple, a strong blond ale with spicy yeast flavors and a bracing alcoholic bluster. Then it's aged in syrah and merlot barrels (which impart a plumlike sourness) and, like Ommegang's Hennepin, topped with a cork and refermented in the bottle. The result is a winery, tannic ale fit for the fanciest dinner party.

24 Alesmith Speedway Stout

San Diego, CA

alesmith.com

Like Bell's Expedition Stout, Speedway is a Russian Imperial Stout, an intense, onyx-black brew suitable for aging (or better yet, drinking now with a good cigar). Alesmith's version takes the style a step further with the addition of actual coffee beans, which give this beer an enticing espresso-like aroma. At 12 percent alcohol, though, it's not the jitters you'll be feeling after a snifter.

25 - New Glarus Yokel

New Glarus, WI

newglarusbrewing.com

Two years ago our samples from this artisanal Wisconsin brewery arrived in a box that looked like it had been to Nigeria and back, every side covered in hundreds of 37-cent postage stamps. Damn, we thought: This place is real. That lack of polish is a virtue in this chewy, unfiltered lager, which reminds us of the deliciously rustic Mahr's Ungespundet Hefträub (unfiltered lager) that last year snatched our souls and inspired us to call Bamberg, Germany's Mahrs Bräu the world's best brewery.

Find More Great Beers Go to mensjournal.com to access our picks from the past two annual "Best Beers" rankings.

Choosing the Proper Glass

It's not just for show. Beer really does taste better in the right glass. Start with these five.

1. Conical Pint, 16 oz: The traditional, and perfectly functional, vessel for your pales, IPAs, bitters, and ambers (\$2.50).
2. Weizenbier Glass, 23 oz: The bulbous shape allows wheat beers to form and keep a good head (\$4.50).
3. Pilsner Glass, 14 oz: Pour your cracklingly dry pilsners in a fluted glass to retain that steady stream of bubbles (\$5).
4. Snifter, 8 oz: Small goblets like brandy snifters are useful for swirling fragrant, high-alcohol beers such as imperial stouts and barleywines (\$2.50).
5. Wine Glass or Goblet, 12 oz: For Belgian beers. Every Belgian brewery has its own goblet, but the important thing is to use a bell-shaped glass, which concentrates the nose of these aromatic beers (\$5.50) (pubglasses.com).

How to Start Checking These Beers off Your List

In a victory for American drinkers the Supreme Court last year smacked down laws prohibiting interstate wine (and, by implication, beer) commerce — a nice step, albeit one that hasn't had much impact on beer or wine sales. Still, with a little tenacity and an internet connection, it shouldn't be too hard to get any of the beers on this list, no matter where you live. Start with the following online stores, which ship anywhere it's legal. Liquid Solutions (liquidsolutions.biz) is a perfect place to start; for East Coast suds Brooklyn's Bierkraft (bierkraft.com) is a great source. If all else fails pressure your local distributor or specialty beer store to carry the stuff you're looking for.