

SESSION ALES

Have Your Hops and Drink Them Too

The first time I remember hearing the word “session” applied to beer was in 2005 when **Full Sail Brewing** introduced Session Lager, a light-bodied and relatively low-alcohol beer packaged in 11-ounce stubby bottles. To be honest, and this is a bit embarrassing, it took years for me to recognize the reasoning behind that beer’s name.

The term *session* describes any craft beer weighing in at something less than 5 percent alcohol by volume (ABV). That’s the general consensus, but there really isn’t any official definition.

There is some debate over the etymology of the term *session* as it applies to beer. The most common theory, and the one that most people accept, suggests that the term was originally used in Britain to refer to any beer that could be consumed over a number of hours, or for an entire session, without inebriating the drinker. That may be as much lore as it is fact, but it does speak to the nature of the term’s use today.

Any style of beer can qualify as a session beer, but around the Pacific Northwest the most popular session beers are India-style Session Ale (ISA), which some breweries call India Session Ale or Session India Pale Ale. The first beer of this type that I recall drinking was Bend, Ore.,’s **10 Barrel Brewing Company**’s ISA, which the company introduced in 2010. Although they refer to it as an India-style Session Ale and stopped brewing the beer last fall, the beer weighed in at 5.5 percent ABV, so it didn’t really qualify as a

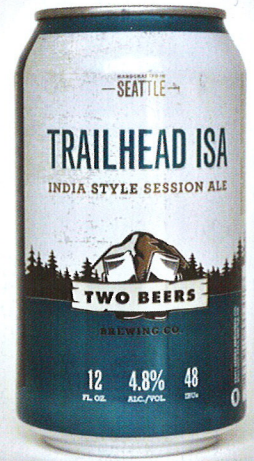
session beer. **No-Li Brewhouse** in Spokane, Wash., follows similar coordinates with the other title in their Empire No. 8 Session IPA that also sits at the same volume and approachability. On the other end, Boneyard Beer in Bend, Ore., plays it straight with their Bone Light India Session Ale with only 4.6 percent ABV and 20 IBUs to liken the lighter side.

In 2011, Seattle’s **Two Beers Brewing Company** introduced its Trailhead ISA in 12-ounce aluminum cans. Trailhead ISA



BY KENDALL JONES

DISCOVERIES & DIVERSIONS



is the first beer I remember carrying the ISA moniker that actually qualified as a session beer.

"I wanted a beer that I could take hiking with me," says Joel VandenBrink, brewmaster and owner at Two Beers Brewing. "I wanted to make a beer that was as satisfying as an IPA but had a lower level of alcohol so I could drink it safely on the trail. It's nice to enjoy a beer when you get to the top of a mountain and discover an amazing view, but you don't want to go drunkenly, stumbling back down the trail."

His sentiment is at the heart of the ISA trend. The beer-loving public has gained a greater appreciation of hop-forward beers, which usually take the form of IPA. At the same time, beer drinkers don't always want to suffer the aftereffects of consuming more than a couple of those typically potent brews. At the core, ISA are lower alcohol versions of India Pale Ale.

Whether you call it ISA or Session IPA, is it actually a style of beer or merely a name on a label? The debate rages on. Currently, the Beer Judging Certification Program, which most beer experts

consider to be the authority when it comes to beer style guidelines in America, does not classify it as a style of beer. Still, it certainly has become a common type of beer and you can walk into any good beer bar in the Northwest and ask the bartender if they have an ISA on tap and nobody will consider it a stupid question.

Because there is no official definition of the term *session*, there is plenty of room for interpretation and confusion. Consider Field 41 Pale Ale, the flagship beer from Yakima, Wash.,'s **Bale**

Breaker Brewing Company. As far as style is concerned, the brewery clearly considers it a Pale Ale, but because it weighs in at less than 5 percent ABV and offers loads of hop character, some beer drinkers would describe it as an ISA.

When a brewery declares a beer to be an ISA, or a Session IPA, they are simply telling you to expect the hop-forward character you'll typically find in an IPA, but with less alcoholic impact. In other words, it is a perfect choice when you want to have your hops and drink them too. ●



WAIT ONE SESSION

A "session ale" can mean one thing to one consumer and another thing to another. Here are a few professional angles at expounding the beer style. In the end, it's all beer to us.

Definitions behind "session drinking" or "sessionable" beers come from British terminology in reference to drinking a large quantity of beer during a "session" without diving too deep into the inebriation end of the pool.

National beer writer and session beer advocate Lew Bryson defines a session beer as an ale that has less than 4.5 percent alcohol by volume.

The Brewers Association places a session beer between 4.0 percent to 5.1 percent alcohol by volume for their competitions.

Eloquently so, the World Beer Cup interprets session beers as "the classic beer style being made to lower strength." To the WBC, they say, "the goal should be to reach a balance between the style's character and the lower alcohol content. Drinkability is a character in the overall balance of these beers."