

# BEER BUZZ

BY KENDALL JONES

## An Elixir for Seasonal Affective Disorder

If you drink craft beer you probably recognize that India Pale Ale (IPA) is the top selling style of craft beer in America. Especially here in Seattle, where IPA is everywhere and our local brewers make some of the best IPAs in the world. It's more surprising to learn that according to big-brained market researchers, who spend as much time and money studying beer as I do drinking it, seasonal beer ranks second among the most popular styles of craft beer.

Seasonal beer isn't actually a beer style. It's a catchall term referring to any beer produced specifically for one of the four seasons, such as maibock for the spring or pumpkin beer for the fall, but when craft beer nerds talk about seasonal beers we typically mean winter beers, those robust and potent ales that numb our senses and help us endure the lovin', dark winter.

The winter beer tradition dates back to medieval England, when seasonally affected peasants and serfs "enjoyed" several different beer-based concoctions. In those days winter beers were created by putting ale into a pot, warming it over a fire, and adding any number of ingredients, like herbs, spices, sugar, honey and even eggs, and then drinking it like punch.

Eventually human beings managed to drag their knuckles out of the dark ages and by the 19<sup>th</sup> Century people were drinking something that more closely resembled the kind of winter beers we enjoy today. The tradition never really caught on in America and by the 1960s winter beers were all but extinct, even in England.

The American craft beer revolution resurrected and reinvented the practice of brewing darker, stronger beers specifically for the winter. Anchor Brewing introduced the first modern winter beer in 1975, dubbing it Christmas Ale. In 1981 Sierra Nevada Brewing cooked up its first

batch of Celebration Ale, and in 1984 Redhook released the first version of Winterhook ale. (All three of those beers are still available each year.) In recent years, all hell has broken loose and just about every brewery in the Northern Hemisphere produces some form of winter beer.

Since it is not typically thought of as an official style, there are no established guidelines for how winter beer is supposed to taste. Like I said, it's a catchall term for any full-bodied, potent beer released exclusively for the darker months. It might resemble a strong porter or a spicy stout. In some cases, it's a beer that fits into another style category—like an imperial stout or a barleywine—but the brewery only releases it during the winter. Many breweries vary their recipes slightly from year to year, so beer geeks get excited to find out exactly how this year's batch of their favorite winter beer tastes.

Autumn's seasonal beers—fresh hop ale and pumpkin beer—are short-lived creatures and will soon be gone, but winter beers begin hitting the shelves in October and promise to keep you company until February or March. By then, the days will be getting longer and we might even get a glimpse of the sun.

In the coming months, you'll have no problem finding lots of winter beer, but the best place to sample a massive variety of these potent potables is at the Washington Winter Beer Fest, which takes place at Magnuson Park's Hangar 30 on December 4th and 5th. There you will find 50 of Washington's breweries serving in excess of 100 different beers, all designed to alter your consciousness and provide a reprieve from the wintry gloom. ([www.washingtonbrewersguild.org](http://www.washingtonbrewersguild.org))

Here are my recommendations for locally brewed winter beers to help you endure the dark, grey Seattle winter.

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