



## America's Newfound Love Affair with Lagers

# CRAFT BREWED LAGERS

BY KENDALL JONES

**T**here's something new in the beer aisle at the grocery store and on the tap list at the local pub. In a region where India pale ales and other robustly flavored ales get most of the attention, lagers are gaining popularity.

In the beginning, there was light. That is, there was nothing but light, watery American lagers—the big, national brands we still recognize today. Then for reasons as mysterious as the creation of the cosmos itself, microbreweries began to pop into existence in the early 1980s and the craft beer revolution began. The embryonic industry was incubated by a slowly growing number of defiant beer drinkers who reached for anything that tasted different than the over-advertised, bland American lagers that dominated the market. Craft brewed ales provided an alternative.

Over the past 30 years, this new breed of beer drinker evolved slowly and collectively, as did the beers they favored. We moved from amber ales to pale ales, and eventually on to intensely bitter and pungent IPA, continually seeking bigger, more assertive flavors. Beers that we considered timid in 2005 would have frightened and confused the primitive craft beer drinkers of the 1980s. By 2010, our collective beer palate could endure and appreciate anything—Belgian-style quadruple ale, bourbon barrel-aged imperial stout and even barleywine.

But there was the quiet voice of lager in the distance and some beer drinkers were beginning to respond to its soft, subtle call.



LAGERS HAIL FROM GERMANY AND ALES HAIL FROM ENGLAND BUT BEYOND THAT DISTINCTION THERE IS A FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THESE TWO BASIC CATEGORIES OF BEER: THE YEAST

**DON'T CALL IT A COMEBACK**

Today many craft beer lovers have evolved to a point that they appreciate the subtleties and the more-delicate nature of well-crafted lagers. In beer bars and bottleshops across the Northwest, beer geeks are more frequently reaching for light, refreshing, crisp and clean lagers, especially pilsner, which seems destined to become the IPA of the lagersphere.

So why is this happening and why is it a big deal?

Historically, lagers hail from Germany and ales hail from England, but beyond that distinction there is a fundamental difference between these two basic categories of beer: the yeast. In simplest terms, ale yeast is fast-acting and does its magic at higher temperatures (55-70 degrees), whereas lager yeast is slow-acting and ferments at lower temperatures (40-54 degrees). The word *lager* actually comes from the German word *lagern*, which means "to store."

Lager yeast works slowly to transform the sugars in the malted barley into the crisp, clean flavors we expect to taste in a good lager, so time is the most critical ingredient in any good lager. Therein lies the difficulty. For breweries, there is a direct correlation between time and money. Those shiny stainless steel tanks you see at breweries are valuable pieces of real estate and the faster a brewery gets beer out of them, the faster it transforms raw ingredients into positive cash flow.

**IN THE DETAILS**

**AIRWAYS BREWING** of Kent, Washington, is probably best known for its Sky Hag IPA, but the brewery won a highly coveted gold medal at the 2014 Great American Beer Festival for its Preflight Pilsner. Alex Dittmar, the founder and head brewer at Airways Brewing, says that such acclaim does not come cheap. "Our pilsner takes over five weeks before it is ready to leave the brewery," he says. "It typically takes about half that long for our IPA."

In other words, a brewery can produce—and sell—two batches of IPA in the time it takes to produce one batch of well-brewed lager, but it's unrealistic to think they could sell the lager for twice as much as the ale.



**THEY AREN'T ALL PILSNER THE MAIN STYLES OF LAGER**

Here are a few lager styles you might find when you look beyond the ales that typically rule tap and bottle lists.

► **Bock**

Standard bock is a strong, amber lager, usually weighing in at no less than 6 percent ABV. Doppelbock (double bock) is darker and stronger, and eisbock is an even more potent version. Maibock (helles bock) is actually a helles brewed to bock strength, traditionally produced for consumption during the spring months. If it's any kind of bock, know that it will be strong and richly flavored.

► **California Common**

Also referred to as Steam Beer, this style of lager is an entirely American invention, dating back to the 1890s when the style first appeared in San Francisco. It typically clocks in between 4.5 and 5.5 percent ABV, is golden in color and features bold but not overwhelming hop bitterness.

► **Helles**

When you say "German beer," this is probably what you mean. A traditional German-style lager, it is straw-blond in color, full-bodied, slightly sweet and features a very faint hop character. Pronounced *hell-us*, this beer style is sometimes called Munich lager or Munich Light lager. They range between 4.5 and 6 percent ABV.

► **India Pale Lager**

Another product of American ingenuity, India pale lager is a catchall term that describes any light lager that is heavily hopped. It's a lager with IPA-like hop character and balances between 5 and 7 percent ABV. Any of the terms we typically use to describe IPA might apply: floral, aromatic, piney, citrusy or bitter. Whereas most lagers are built for balance, IPL is unabashedly hop-forward.

► **Kölsch**

Not long ago, kölsch was an obscure style of beer brewed in Cologne, Germany, but in recent years it gained popularity with American brewers and beer lovers. It is bright, straw gold, with a light to medium body, mild to assertive hop bitterness and is low in alcohol (4.5 to 5.2 percent ABV). It is produced by fermenting the beer at higher temperatures, like an ale, and then cold-conditioning it like a lager. Give it a long, German "o" and say it more like *coolsch* and less like *coalsch*.

► **Märzen**

A strong, well-hopped style of beer, with a medium to full body, the color varies from light amber to very dark, almost-brown amber. It is usually served at the big Oktoberfest celebration in Munich, so beers bearing the name Oktoberfest are usually märzen. It sits inside 5 and 6.2 percent ABV. Pronounce it properly: not *mar-zen*, but *mairt-zen*.

► **Pilsner**

This is the most popular style of beer in the world and it's said that 90 percent of the beers on the planet are fashioned, with varying degrees of success, after the pilsner model. It is typically divided into two categories. Czech-style is golden, brilliantly clear and moderately effervescent. German-style is lighter in color and body, but tends to have a more pronounced hop bitterness. Both versions rely heavily on hops for much of the character, which might explain why well-crafted pilsner is so popular with today's hop-loving craft beer drinker. Expect your pilsner to measure in at a modest 4.5 to 5 percent ABV.

► **Vienna Lager**

Named after the city where it first appeared in the 1800s, Vienna lager is now becoming familiar to Americans. It is a reddish-brown or copper-colored lager with medium body and mild malty sweetness. Both the aroma and flavor may feature a slightly toasted character. Alcohol content can vary from 4.0 to 6.5 percent ABV.

FROM GERMANY AND ALES HAIL FROM ENGLAND... THESE TWO BASIC CATEGORIES OF BEER... THE YEAST LAGE



important in the production of any beer, but are critical when brewing lagers. If brewing ale is like baking a cake, then brewing lager is like nurturing a soufflé—they both present challenges, but the latter requires more precision and finesse.

Allen thinks more brewers are up to the challenge these days and that's why lagers have gained popularity. He believes that the overall quality of craft beer has improved and craft lagers happily reflect that trend. On top of that, today's beer drinkers are savvy enough to notice the difference between good lagers and bad.

**BALANCING ART AND SCIENCE**

One of a small handful of lager-only breweries in the Northwest, **CHUCKANUT BREWERY AND KITCHEN** opened in Bellingham in 2008 and immediately earned national acclaim for its delicious, authentic, German-style lagers. These days, Chuckanut sets the standard when it comes to craft brewed lagers, not just here in the Northwest, but nationwide.

Will Kemper, brewmaster at Chuckanut Brewery, touches on the lager brewing process with clinical precision. "The main overriding issue of lower temperatures for lagers (is that it) impacts yeast performance, fermentation

and conditioning time... equipment demands and flavor profile," he says. "This inconvenience is necessary to attain the best product. Not accommodating these factors will never produce the best results."

Kemper's methodical nature is reflected in the quality of Chuckanut Brewery's world-class lagers. Brewing any good beer requires equal parts art and science, but creating good lagers definitely requires more attention to, and a better understanding of, the scientific side of brewing.

"Our known product style is not overwhelming, but subtle," says Kemper. "Consequently, we do not get brash regard. What is most gratifying to us is that professionals within our industry understand what we are doing and they are our biggest fans."

Fellow brewers might be among Chuckanut's fans, but increasing hordes of beer drinkers are learning to appreciate what brewers like Kemper are brewing.

In the beginning, some enthusiasts feel it was a binary decision; either you preferred lager or you preferred craft beer. Now, thanks in large part to the increased prowess of the American craft brewing industry, we enjoy more choices than ever, and that includes clean, crisp, subtle lagers, which provide the perfect counterpoint to the big, robust ales that so often dominate our thoughts. ●

**A TASTE OF NORTHWEST LAGER**



**Clem's Gold**  
 ▶ ORLISON BREWING  
 ▶ AIRWAY HEIGHTS, WA  
 ▶ 5.3% ABV  
 Effervescent with a deep golden hue, the nose evokes thoughts of cereal and fresh-cut grass. The flavor is slightly sweet, with a biscuit character moderated by a faint, spicy hop character.

**Czech Pils**  
 ▶ BUOY BEER CO.  
 ▶ ASTORIA, OR  
 ▶ 6.2% ABV  
 Glisteningly blonde and lively with aromatics, this pils takes on scents of crackers, corn and soil with bright hops that complement the rotund malt-forward flavor. Finishes round and zested with citrus.

**North Fork American Lager**  
 ▶ PAYETTE BREWING  
 ▶ BOISE, ID  
 ▶ 4.4% ABV  
 Pale golden and slightly hazy, this lager releases a faintly sweet, metallic aroma. Crisp and light-bodied, a pleasant, fruity, hoppy bite on the front end mellows quickly leaving a slight bitterness lingering.

**Pre-Flight Pilsner**  
 ▶ AIRWAYS BREWING  
 ▶ KENT, WA  
 ▶ 5% ABV  
 An herbal, grassy hop character mingles happily with crisp, clean cracker flavors in this bright and glimmering, light-golden brew. The flavors are delicate but pronounced, fleeting but memorable.

**Pilsner**  
 ▶ CHUCKANUT BREWERY  
 ▶ BELLINGHAM, WA  
 ▶ 5% ABV  
 Bright golden, this pils unleashes a breadly aroma with hints of herbs and citrus peel. The flavor is a balance of malty, corn-like sweetness and a spicy, flowery hop character that provides a bitterness that softly persists.

**Sticke Alt**  
 ▶ HEATER ALLEN BREWING  
 ▶ MCMINVILLE, OR  
 ▶ 5.7% ABV  
 Pronounced *schtick-uh ault*, this interpretation of a traditional German-style lager is dark amber and cloudy, with a rich, malty nose. The complex malty flavor is balanced perfectly by an aggressive, lasting hop bitterness.

**Vienna Style Lager**  
 ▶ LONG BREWING  
 ▶ NEWBERG, OR  
 ▶ 6.2% ABV  
 The aroma wafting from this glowing amber lager summons thoughts of over-ripe stone fruit. Caramel notes dominate the flavor, without being too sweet or overbearing.

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