

Missoula: Montanan for Beer

Discover the Craft Drink Hub that is Montana's Second-Largest City

BY KENDALL JONES

For travelers headed east on Interstate 90 from the Pacific Northwest, the booming college town of Missoula is the gateway to Montana, the first settlement of any magnitude you'll discover after crossing the state line. Many folks use Montana's second-largest city as a rest stop along the way to Yellowstone National Park or other attractions deeper into the Treasure State, but there are plenty of reasons to make Missoula your destination. Among them, a vibrant nightlife and a blossoming drinks culture.

Before you settle in for your first round of whatever wets your whistle,

spend some time enjoying the abundant outdoor recreation opportunities that Montana affords. Consider a ramble on one of several nearby trails, like a hike up Mount Sentinel, towering over the city to the southeast. Another close-in and much mellower option is the Waterworks Hill trail, which provides expansive views of the city and the Bitterroot Valley. If your idea of relaxation involves a fishing rod and a river, get hooked up with a guide, some advice or whatever gear you need at The Missoulia Angler Fly Shop; they've helped people get out on the river since 1987.

Mount Sentinel towers over the University of Montana and the rest of Missoula



River City Brews

» BEER BARS AROUND

Leave the fishing gear behind and partake in a favorite local pastime: whiling away the afternoon as you float lazily down the river. The Clark Fork River bisects the town and the Blackfoot and Bitterroot rivers are also nearby. One local resident described Missoula as “a drinking town with a river-floating problem.” The locals often do it on inner tubes, but **RIVER CITY BREWS** offers fully outfitted rafting trips that include a beer- and cider-tasting experience that highlights the wares of local producers.

Get dirty, sweaty and wet, then find your way back into town to enjoy a civilized evening in this surprisingly urbane

and sophisticated city. From swanky cocktail lounges to rustic dive bars, and everything in between, Missoula quenches your well-earned thirst. Carouse your way around town as you will, just know that you'll eventually find a lot of beer in Missoula, the city where Montana's craft beer scene was born.

Let's face it, one of the reasons you came to Montana is to see the wildlife, and one of the best places to do that is **THE RHINOCEROS BAR**. Rustic, friendly but a little rough around the edges, “The Rhino” was one the very first bars in the entire state to offer any craft beer at all. Since 1987 the bar has featured 50 beers on tap. Along with that, the menu includes an impressive selection of top-shelf whiskeys that would make most big-city whiskey bars blush.

Also a bit gruff and frowzy in a loveable, Montana way, **CHARLIE B'S** is a favorite for many locals who might simultaneously describe it as a dive bar, a college bar, a cowboy bar and a hippie bar. The walls are decked with dozens of hauntingly striking, black-and-white, 8 x 10-inch photographs of celebrities' faces, many of whom are only famous because of the time they spent sitting at the bar at Charlie B's. At the back of the room, the **DINOSAUR CAFÉ** — affectionately known as the Dino — serves surprisingly authentic Cajun food from a small service window.



The Rhinoceros Bar

» GRAINS AND APPLES

There's nothing wild or rustic about **PLONK**, a chic downtown lounge where the menu includes to-die-for craft cocktails and a sizable selection of wines — somewhat rare around these parts. Brick walls, tin ceilings and white tablecloths are illuminated by antique, hanging light fixtures. If the weather agrees, the rooftop patio is a lovely place to enjoy a summer's eve beneath strings of Edison bulbs. If you're a home-sick city slicker, this is the place for you. And if you're looking for an upscale meal, Plonk offers a big list of imaginative small plates along with some larger and heartier options, like the Montana-raised beef tenderloin served with a black garlic reduction and a caper chimichurri.

No drink-minded visitor should miss **MONTGOMERY DISTILLERY**, where they craft award-winning spirits of all types, including whiskey, gin, vodka and aquavit. The team concocts exquisite cocktails with fresh-squeezed juice and fresh-picked herbs in a tasting room that is stylishly decorated, yet includes a touch of Montana kitsch (like taxi-dermy). Sink into a plush booth at the front



Montgomery Distillery



Plonk



Western Cider

window, share one of the large kitchen-style tables or sidle up to the bar, which dates back to 1889 when the place was built as a saloon and liquor distribution warehouse.

If you've got a hankering for some cider and maybe some square dancing, visit **WESTERN CIDER** about a mile west of downtown. Dubbed Missoula's first cidery, Western Cider began planting its own orchards in the Bitterroot Valley in 2012 and today produces a wide range of ciders using, in part at least, estate-grown apples. Beyond the spacious taproom, a riverside cider garden invites you to enjoy the Montana sun. Ask about the Old Time Cider Jams (think, fiddles and acoustic guitars) and, yes, the square dancing. Apparently, Missoula's flannel-clad millennials like to dance as their grandparents did.

Savvy cider- and beer-loving travelers always bring an empty growler or two along for the ride, and there's no better place to fill them up than **THE DRAM SHOP**, which offers 37 taps of mostly local libations. It's a clean, modern space where you are also invited to hunker down for a pint or two. Note that if you left some important camping, hiking or adventure gear at home, you're in luck. The Dram Shop is right next door to a legendary outdoor gear shop, The Trailhead.



The Dram Shop

» BUT YOU SAID BEER

Along the main drag, west of downtown, **IMAGINE NATION BREWING** opened in 2015 and quickly became a local favorite. The taproom is cozy and spills out onto a riverside patio. The brewery makes a lot of different styles, and has a special knack for hazy IPAs; but the flagship beer, Freedom Fighter IPA, is always a safe bet. Inside or out, the taproom often hosts live music. Monday is usually open mic night, Tuesday is reserved for traditional Irish jam sessions and Saturday features rotating local musicians. Food is available from a permanently parked food truck offering Middle Eastern cuisine like kebabs, falafel and shawarma.

KETTLEHOUSE BREWING operates three breweries in the area, each with a taproom; but if you're only going to visit one, you'll want to slide into the original. Across the river, south of downtown, KettleHouse Southside is a well-worn, cozy and comfortable neighborhood hangout that teems with hyper-local beer lovers, many traveling by foot or bike. The crowd is as diverse as the beer offerings, with blue-collar workers mingling with urban professionals and college professors. Definitely try at least a sample of the Cold Smoke Scotch Ale, which is probably Montana's most popular beer, or at least its most ubiquitous.

The company's second brewery and taproom, the Northside Brewery, is larger in terms of taproom size and brewing capacity. Located near the train yards, the building was originally constructed in 1909 and served as a trackside warehouse in its previous life. KettleHouse Brewing's third location is a few miles upriver in the town of Bonner where, in addition to a brewery

and taproom, the company built an amphitheater that hosts some impressive touring musical acts during the warmer months.

Located in an old brick warehouse in Missoula's historic Westside neighborhood, **DRAUGHT WORKS BREWERY** is creating some of the city's most creative beers, like Sweet Heat Habañero IPA, Cucumber Mojito Sour and Rosé Deux American Sour. The building's interior is beautiful, with an amazing arched, oak beam ceiling. But the real star of the show is the massive patio with seating for dozens of thirsty patrons.

For those outside the state's borders, Moose Drool brown ale is probably Montana's most recognizable beer, but that's just one of the offerings at **BIG SKY BREWING CO.** The brewery opened its first taproom in 2017, so you can now sample all the beers and pick your pint. In the summer, the brewery hosts an outdoor concert series that always features some big-name acts. This year's lineup includes Brad Paisley and Jackson Browne.

No discussion of beer in Missoula, or Montana for that matter, would be complete without a nod to **BAYERN BREWING** (pronounced *BYE-ern*). At the brewery, they operate a taproom as well as a full-service restaurant, the **EDELWEISS BISTRO**, serving authentic German-style food like currywurst and wiener schnitzel. Montana's oldest craft brewery still focuses on authentic, Bavarian-style lagers just as it has since 1987. Enjoy all that the city has to offer, but make sure you stop by the brewery that gave birth to Montana's modern craft beer culture. After a hike, a float or whatever adventure you've enjoyed, a tall, cold glass of Bayern Brewing's Montana Original Lager seems necessary and oh-so-appropriate. ●



Imagine Nation Brewing

REST YOUR HEAD

GOLDSMITH'S BED AND BREAKFAST » The historic brick home, now 108 years old, has a storied past and the innkeeper will be happy to share its amazing history with you. Located right across the river from the university, it's a 10-minute walk to downtown. The seven rooms are comfortable, but you'll want to spend plenty of time on the front porch watching the river roll by.

CITY CENTER MOTEL » This classic Eisenhower-era motel has been reimaged and remodeled to offer everything you need and nothing you don't. Now in the care of a local married couple, they've lovingly brought it into the 21st century while offering a budget-conscious lodging option near the heart of downtown.

HOLIDAY INN MISSOULA DOWNTOWN » While it might lack charm and local character, you cannot beat the downtown, riverfront location. This large hotel offers all the amenities you'd expect from a national chain, like a well-equipped fitness center, an indoor pool, a restaurant and bar, and a business center.