

Pale Lagers

Finally, a beer style that we are all familiar with! You might be reading this and wondering why I say that, because many of you might not realize that Pale Lagers are by far, the most popular beer style in North America. Examples? How about Miller, Miller Lite, Coors, Coors Light, Heineken, Corona, Stella Artois, Rolling Rock, Pabst, Old Style, Schlitz, Amstel, Pilsner Urquell, Sam Adams Boston Lager, Moosehead, Molson, Fosters, Labatts, etc., etc, etc.

Get it? There are a lot of them and the vast majority of the beer consumed in the United States is of the Pale Lager style.

There are two basic types of beers, ales and lagers. Ales are fermented at warmer temperatures with yeast that thrives at those temperatures and that do most of their work at the top of the fermentation tank, hence the term "top fermenting" is used when discussing ales. Lagers, on the other hand, utilize yeast that work at cooler temperatures and do most of their fermenting near the bottom of the tank, hence the term "bottom fermenting" is applied to lagers.

The origins of modern lagers date to Austria (Vienna) in the early nineteenth century. Anton Dreher is credited with brewing the very first lager in 1836. Prior to that time, all beers being brewed were ales, but Dreher was able to isolate a strain of yeast that fermented at lower, lager temperatures and created a beer that was brewed entirely with that yeast. His creation eventually became the Vienna Lager.

Taking their lead from Dreher, Bavarian brewers often matured their beer in caves to control the temperature and keep it fresh. The beer was called "lagerbier" from the German word "lagern," which means "to store." Due to the relatively cool environment the caves provided, yeast used to ferment the beer had to function well at lower temperatures and the modern "lager yeast" was cultured for this purpose.

Through their experience with lagering beers and culturing bottom fermenting yeast, German brewers originally created the basic techniques for creating lager beer and it was a Bavarian brewer working for a Czech brewery who is credited with creating the first Pale Lager, a Pilsener.

Food Pairings

Pale Lagers are wonderful beers to drink cold on a warm, summer day. Their high carbonation, relatively light body and flavor make them the prototypical "cold one." They often pair well with many meats, poultry, fish or any dish that calls for a cleansing, cold drink to accompany it.



Pilseners



Josef Groll was a Bavarian brewer who was hired by the Burgess Brewery in Bohemia (now the Czech Republic) to produce lager beers. Groll used new pale malts to create a new lager in 1842 and the remarkably soft water available to him in Bohemia allowed him to create a pale, golden beer that was much lighter in color than those he was able to produce in Bavaria. The Pilsener style took its name from the city of Plzen in which the Burgess Brewery was located.

The new style of beer caused an immediate sensation with the public and with drinkers who were used to looking at dark, cloudy beers. About the same time, clear glassware was becoming more and more popular for holding drinks and was replacing darker metal, stone and wooden drinking vessels, which hid the dark, cloudy nature of most beers. Consumers were very excited to be able to see through their cup and now they were able to see through the beer as well.

Traditional Pilseners tend to be very crisp, clean and strongly carbonated. A bright, pale to golden color is very typical. The flavor tends to accentuate the hoppy bitterness, but not overly so. Czech style versions are usually less hoppy than their German counterparts.

It is important to note that many brewers use the word "pilsener" to designate a beer as their "premium" beer, even if the style of beer is not intended to be a traditional Pilsener.

Dortmunder Export

Not to be outdone, German brewers responded to the success of the Pilsener style with a creation of their own that came to be known as the Dortmunder Export lager. Originally brewed in the German city of Dortmund in 1873, the Dortmunder Export style became a huge hit for German brewers, particularly those located in and around Dortmund.

Eventually, several Dortmund Brewers banded together to form the "Dortmunder Union" under which name many early Dortmunder Export beers were produced. The beer became very successful with laborers and industrial workers in and around Westphalia (northwestern Germany). Beer sold locally in Dortmund was known as "Export" while beer shipped to other cities was known there as "Dortmund beer," leading to the modern term of Dortmunder Export.

Munich Helles Lagers

Though well known for its wheat beers, the city of Munich brews its own version of the Pale Lager known as a Helles Lager or Hellbier. In Germany, Helles simply means pale, so the light, golden beers of Munich are sometimes referred to as Munich Helles Lagers. In contrast to the slightly hoppy Pilsener style, Munich Helles lagers tend to favor the malt flavor (sweetness) over the flavor of hops (bitter).

European Pale Lagers

Similarly, many other cities throughout Europe jumped on the Pilsener bandwagon with lagers of their own.

California Common Beer (Steam Beer)

In Gold Rush days, miners and other workers in the exploding population of California demanded a cheap beer in large quantities. Saloon keepers and brewers responded with a beer that they called "steam beer." At the time, "steam beer" was a rather cheap, low quality beer. Steam beer was brewed with lager yeast (bottom fermenting) but at higher, ale temperatures. So while it is considered to be a lager, it is fermented more like an ale.

No one really knows how or why the word "steam" came to be associated with the style, but some speculate that because the beer was so highly carbonated, it tended to "let off some steam" when a keg was tapped. There is no record of the beer ever being produced with the use of actual steam.

Today, Anchor Brewing Company of San Francisco has a trademark on the phrase "Anchor Steam Beer (TM)" and while the name is similar, the quality of the beer has gone up considerably. Anchor creates its Steam Beer (TM) with the highest quality ingredients. Yet because of the trademark that Anchor owns, this style of beer is often referred to as California Common.

American Lagers

After prohibition (1920-1933), economics and marketing gained a strong foothold in the American beer market at the expense of traditional brewing techniques and beer styles. Large American brewers were able to cut corners and trim expenses by using non-traditional ingredients to brew beer. Ingredients like rice and corn (known to brewers as "adjuncts") started to be used on a large scale as they were cheaper than barley and even easier to obtain. These light bodied and light flavored American Lagers were meant to be consumed very cold, at temperatures where flavor and body would be difficult to detect.

Especially today, if you must drink a typical American lager, I would encourage you to drink it at cold enough temperatures that you too will be unable to taste it.

Hybrids

Some beers defy categorization as either an ale or a lager. For example, **Kolsch** beers (Cologne, Germany) are brewed with a yeast that works a little like both ale and lager yeast. It ferments at cooler ale temperatures (55 - 65 degrees) and the beer is lagered for about a month before it is ready to be served. Additionally, **Altbiers** (also from Germany) can be brewed either as lagers or ales. Some use lager yeast while others use ale yeast.