

Wheat Beers

The use of wheat grain in place of barley is a centuries old practice in Europe that has only recently begun to spread like wildfire in North America. Long before the rest of the world knew what it was missing and before the wheat styles exploded in American, Germans and Belgian drinkers had almost grown tired of wheat ales. In the 1960's, Michael Jackson reports that only "old ladies in hats" were drinking wheat beer in Bavaria, the traditional German home of wheat beers. Wheat beers were seemingly a dying style.

Today, wheat ales are popular again in Germany and almost everywhere else. They are the fastest growing segment of the craft beer market, particularly in the United States.

What is a wheat beer?

Let's back up for a second to remember that there are four basic ingredients in beer. Those ingredients are [malted grain](#), hops, yeast and water. While barley is the most typically used grain, some brewers started to substitute wheat for a portion of the barley and today, we call a beer a wheat ale when at least 50% of the grain is wheat. In almost every wheat beer, wheat is between 50 and 70% of the grain. Barley would constitute the remaining percentage of grain.

Various Styles of Wheat Beer

Wheat beer isn't just a single style. Rather, wheat beers are divided into many different categories. In general, there are German wheat beers, Belgian wheat beers and American wheat beers that all differ dramatically from each other, though all are based primarily on wheat grain.

German Wheats

The Germans have been brewing wheat beers since the 1500's, mostly centered in Bavaria (southern Germany). Wheat was seen as a tasty alternative to the normal "red" ales brewed with barley. Accordingly, the Germans have developed a number of distinct styles of wheat beer.

Today the **hefeweizen** (or **weisse**) is the most popular and common of German wheat beers. Hefeweizens are pale colored ales and often taste of banana or clove. The banana, clove or other flavors are produced by esters, which are a by-product of the fermentation process.

The word "weizen" simply means wheat, while "hefe" means yeast. So a hefeweizen is a wheat beer that has a very detectable yeast presence, usually in the form of a cloudiness or haziness in the beer. A hefeweizen that had the yeast removed or filtered out would usually be referred to as a **kristallweizen**, referring to its crystal clear appearance.

The hefeweizen style of beer is often imitated by American micro-brewers with some tremendous success.

Dark versions of hefeweizens are called **dunkelweizens**. Today, the pale hefeweizen is more popular, but in centuries past the darker dunkelweizens were more common.

The **weizenbock** is a strong, dark wheat ale. Unlike normal bock beers, the weizenbock is usually an ale (top fermented) while bock beers are lagers (bottom fermented). Of course, the primary difference in a weizenbock is the use of wheat instead of an all barley bock beer.

American Wheats

American wheat ales are a different beer altogether. Instead of relying on spices (like witbiers) or esters (like hefeweizens), American wheats typically try to provide a true wheat flavor. As such, American wheat ales tend to be very crisp and clean, with a grainy, nutty and slightly sweet flavor. The bitter flavor of hops is typically very low in American wheat ales.

In the fall of 2005, Bell's Brewing created an experimental series of wheat ales that really highlighted variations in taste and style within the American wheat ale category. Bell's Wheat Series included five ales called Wheat Two, Wheat Four, Wheat Six, Wheat Eight and Wheat Love. Wheat Love, the final and strongest entry in Bell's Wheat Series ventured into another style of wheat ale, the **Wheat Wine**.

Wheat Wine

Wheat wines are wheat ales that are brewed to high alcohol levels. Wheat wines are typically American beers based on the American wheat style, though some stronger wheat ales from around the world are sometimes referred to as wheat wines. Wheat wines are typically brewed to 9% or more alcohol by volume (abv), while the typical American wheat beer is closer to 5% or 6% abv.

Cuisine

Wheat Ales are perfect for poultry, Latin American cuisine and earthy cheeses, as well as green salads. They are typically very refreshing and most popular in warmer weather.



Drink Wheat Beers in a weizen glass.