

More from Hank -

Making your summer vacation plans?

I, wife, stepdaughter and M in law escaped in my two-day old 2005 CRV the AM Katrina hit. All of those named are even now running well including 92-year-old M in law. When I read this article, I thought about climbing in that still great CRV and doing a beer exploration. My schedule is tight however so perhaps ONE OF YOU will do it and write it up for next month's Hopline. *Hank*

ON ALBUQUERQUE'S industrial northern fringe, down a side street flanked by auto-parts stores, I found the wellspring of American beer. I'd been traveling; I was parched. What I discovered rewrote my understanding of American beer. The brewery was La Cumbre, the beer was a Scotch Ale. A traditional Scottish beer, served on cask, 5,000 miles from Edinburgh? It was a taste of how deliciously unpredictable American craft brewing has become.

What is American beer? That depends on where you're drinking. Sure, you can still find a familiar red-and-white can in any corner store, and rest assured it'll taste identical no matter where you buy it. But on a recent beer-focused road trip, I traced the outlines of a number of distinct and diverse regional styles: **the New England IPA, the Southern Saison, the Great Lakes Gose, the Rocky Mountain Lager, the Cascadian Fruited Sour, the Southwest Scotch Ale and the SoCal Session.**

Some new, some traditional, many growing from particular local customs and conditions. I discovered there's more and better beer in America than ever before. As craft brewing has downsized, it has regionalized. Brewers big and small can source ingredients from anywhere. And styles born of necessity or the geopolitical jockeying of another place and age—Scottish beers made with little or no hops, for example, flying in the face of English brewing practice—are providing inspiration for experimentation stateside. Your neighborhood nanobrewery might serve locally, but brew with an international palette: hops from Australia, grain from the Czech Republic, yeast from Germany and water chemically treated to taste like Belgium's.

At the same time, many new craft breweries are using their nimble size to play with local flavors; small batches let you experiment more freely with rare or low-yield crops. Many champions of this locavore movement brew in the Northwest, using homegrown fruits to produce the region's proliferating sour beers, and in the South, following on the recent renaissance of Southern cuisine and its focus on local flavors. "The number of ingredients that find their way into the beers we make here is endless," said Todd Boera, farmer-turned-brewer in charge of Fonta Flora brewery in Morganton, N.C.

Saisons—dry, easy-drinking farmhouse beers built on a hearty grab bag of grains, often fermented with wild yeast, spices or fruits—are a perfect canvas on which to paint with local plant life. At Fonta Flora, drinkers routinely find at least half a dozen on tap. But they rarely see the same one twice, and could never find them outside the region. “We’re not making these beers year-round, because we’re waiting for certain ingredients to be harvested again,” Mr. Boera said. “It creates a lot of excitement.” Right now, he’s excited about Bloody Butcher corn, a hard-to-find heritage grain. “It’s dry and earthy and has that nice, grainy aroma. The kernels are a gorgeous red like giant pomegranate seeds,” he said. “Plus, people just love the name.” Bloody Butcher is a crowd pleaser and saison is a Southern staple. “You might have a Bud-Light-drinkin’ good ol’ boy next to the world’s biggest beer geek, both drinking saisons,” said Mr. Boera.

Many factors led to the formation of this new archipelago of American beer styles. The most obvious: peer pressure. Small-scale brewers are driven by friendly one-upmanship and the reinforcing feedback loop of local tastes. “We can brew whatever we want,” said Bryant Goulding, vice president and co-founder of Cincinnati’s Rhinegeist. “But you want to reference your peers, pay homage to them and, yeah—beat them. It’s competitive but cooperative.” So if one Great Lakes brewery makes a damn good gose (a slightly sour, slightly salty German wheat style), another will surely follow. Mr. Goulding mentioned Destihl, from Chicago. That brewery’s take on the style, called Here Gose Nothin’, is puckering tart; Rhinegeist’s has a meringue-like softness. Both are hits.

New England IPAs have a decidedly secessionist pedigree. While the reigning kings of IPA are brewed in the West Coast style, sticky with bitter resin from Northwest-grown hops, New England’s upstarts, often brewed with milder hops from the South Seas, are “smooth, really aromatic with pineapple and mango, and super cloudy with hop particulates,” said Josh Christie, Portland, Maine, beer writer and co-owner of Print: A Bookstore. The origins of the New England IPA style are just as murky. “A bunch of places came up with it at the same time,” Mr. Christie said. But signs point to Bissell Brothers in Portland, Maine, and Treehouse in Monson, Mass., as pioneers. The style spread, fueled as much by brewery competition as the local penchant for aggressive uniqueness. This is, after all, the land of Walden, Woodstock and wicked-local slang. “I think a strong part of New England [identity] is wanting to forge your own path,” Mr. Christie said. “We’re not going to keep brewing English or West Coast IPAs. We’re going to do our own thing.”

SoCal Session Beers Meanwhile, Southern California’s waters, once roiling with hop bombs, have calmed. Inspired by British brews suited for afternoons at the pub, SoCal brewers have embraced session beers—relatively low-alcohol brews designed for drinking in quantity—that keep all the hop flavor without the boozy bite. Easy Jack from Firestone Walker in Paso Robles, Calif.—sweet as orange blossom and just as delicate—carries the flag. Even San Diego’s Stone Brewing, whose beer once snarled, “You’re not worthy,” now offers Go To IPA, lighter, accessible and eager to please.

Rocky Mountain Lagers Sessionable, lower-alcohol brews rule the Rockies, as well (now that Colorado's drinkers can find headier indulgences in other, newly legal forms). In the town of Durango, Patagonia-clad après-sport-sters discuss trout size, mountain bike trails and Telemark technique over grain-forward continental lagers. Two Great American Beer Festival medal winners in the category (Carver's Lightner Creek and Ska's Mexican Logger) come from this tiny town.

Southwest Scotch Ale Farther south, red rye and toasted barley give dark Southwestern IPAs a cracker-crunch. Albuquerque beer writer Christopher Jackson calls his blog Dark Side Brew Crew. Is the name a nod to the local passion for the Stygian side of the beer world? Turns out he's just a heavy metal fan who likes stouts. But on the whole, Mr. Jackson said, "we do like big, bold flavors here in New Mexico. Beers that stand up to the green chilis." And for that, a Scotch ale is perfect. Brewed with rich dark malts but fermented long and cool for a lighter body, "it's a bridge beer between a lager and a stout, malt-forward but without the weight." In other words, strong enough to balance a Hatch Valley hot pepper, mild enough to actually enjoy in the heat.

When I tasted La Cumbre's Caber Tossler, served from a hand-pulled cask in Albuquerque, it was creamy, soft and slightly smoky—dark but light, strong but smooth, utterly distinctive but also recognizably of its region. American beer may be all over the place these days, but you can use the regional styles laid out here to navigate this new landscape. Let the recommendations above be your jumping-off place:

Great Lakes Gose

(Hank's note about Gose..made it about 2005 and brought a keg to a meeting and few liked it!)

- 1. Off Color Troublesome** (*Illinois; 4.3%*) A sprinkle of coriander adds a complex zest to this Chicago sour, serrating its sharp edge with notes of spice and citrus
- 2. Destihl Wild Sour Series Here Gose Nothin'** (*Illinois; 5%*) Tart and tannic like a lime wedge with an almost sticky, resinous sourness that lingers
- 3. Rhinegeist Peach Dodo** (*Ohio; 4%*) A subtle brew with the barest hints of tip-of-the-tongue acid bite, sweet fruit and a pleasantly creamy finish.

New England IPA

- 1. Alchemist Heady Topper** (*Vermont; 8%*) Brewed in tiny batches, sold in humble silver cans, jagged with raw-orange-oil hop flavor, this much-coveted IPA is a favorite of beer nerds.
- 2. Maine Beer Lunch** (*Maine; 7%*) Soft on the palate but bursting bright on the nose with strawberry, pineapple and banana, like a sweet spoonful of tropical sorbet.
- 3. Lawson's Finest Liquids Sip of Sunshine** (*Vermont; 8%*) A fitting name for this blindingly fresh beer, whose cloudy looks belie the clear, sharp acidity of ripe papaya.

Cascadian FRUITED Sour

1. **Cascade Kriek** (*Oregon; 8.2%*) Fans hoard rare vintages of this vanilla-sweet, balsamic-biting, barrel-aged beer from the pioneers of Pacific sours. It changes every year with the cherry crop.
2. **Sante Adairius Rustic Ales West Ashley** (*California; 7.3%*) This sour has a creamy-sweet body, like fruit-on-the-bottom yogurt, from a months-long rest in Pinot barrels stuffed with apricots.
3. **Logsdon Farmhouse Ales Peche 'n Brett** (*Oregon; 10%*) Wild yeast and farm-fresh peaches—a half a pound per gallon—give a fuzzy, floral dryness with wisps of fruit like an orchard on the breeze.

Southwest Scotch ALE

1. **Bosque Scotia** (*New Mexico; 7.8%*) Richer, smoother and less biting than most, with a satisfying crunch like the buttery crust of cinnamon toast.
2. **Bow and Arrow Crossed Arrows Scotch** (*New Mexico; 7.2%*) A twisted take from this brand-new Albuquerque brewery: honey-sweet, light and dry, a Scotch ale with a saison's heart or a pale ale in a kilt.
3. **Four Peaks Kilt Lifter** (*Arizona; 6%*) From fiery Phoenix, a burnt-red brew rich with toasty malt and just the right balance of tannic, roasted coffee and sweet caramel syrup. (*Hank's note-I take my roving reporter title so seriously I even went to Phoenix to test this. ...the fact that my son lives there is ONLY a coincidence-VERY TASTY!*)

Rocky Mountain Lager

1. **Carver Lightner Creek Lager** (*Colorado; 4.4%*) The snappy, crisp and slightly sweet German-style beer from these Durango upstarts is practically synonymous with lager in this mountain town.
2. **Ska Mexican Logger** (*Colorado; 5.2%*) With two Great American Beer Festival medals in as many years, Ska sets the standard for Rocky Mountain lagers: pleasantly gritty, like beach sand in the air.
3. **Oskar Blues Beerito** (*Colorado; 4%*) Local Colorado-grown Troubadour barley gives this Lyons-made beer the earthy chew of good corn masa, like a handmade tortilla.

SoCal Session

1. **Stone Go To IPA** (*California; 4.8% ABV*) A chilled and cheery crowd-pleaser of yellow peach and cantaloupe from the folks who defined the bitter-er-than-thou West Coast IPA style.
2. **Ballast Point Even Keel** (*California; 3.8% ABV*) Spritzing with citrus and a touch of lemongrass, this beer is light as sea spray and smooth as beach glass, with a heftier body than other sessions.
3. **Firestone Walker Easy Jack** (*California; 4.5%*) The British-inspired barrel-aging specialists at this brewery freshen up this fruit-basket of a beer with brightly tropical hops from Australia and New Zealand.