

## Hank Speaks... So Listen by Hank Bienert

It's a truth that when you think beer, you often have to drink beer so here's a nice review from WSJ on what you might want to libate (*WOW, I believe I have just made up a verb!!*). Curiosity 'bout this style is based on some sips from The Sam Adams Pumpkin beer in the sampler we shared at the brew meet at our house mid-October.

When the leaves change color, beer store shelves turn orange to match. It's pumpkin beer season, and the trap is set. Each year, we can't resist plucking a bottle or two, but like a bowl of candy corn, their festive hue belies their taste: too sweet, too sour and sodden with perfume-y spice.

It doesn't have to be this way. The best pumpkin beers are the most unexpected. Far from pie-in-a-bottle, they blend in maple syrup, dark chocolate and the vanilla smoothness of oak barrels—dressing the humble gourd in elaborate costumes that buck almost 400 years of tradition.

Long considered the candy-corn of seasonal beers (colorful, but not so tasty), pumpkin beers are starting to prove otherwise. William Bostwick reviews some of his favorites on Lunch Break as Wendy Bounds and Connor Dougherty taste test the brews.

Pumpkin beer is as old as American beer itself. The first settlers from Europe, having braved the wild Atlantic for a strange and tavern-bare land, can't be faulted for slapping beer together from whatever scraps they could find. Into Colonial brew kettles went corn stalks, molasses, tree bark, persimmons and lots and lots of pumpkins. "We have pumpkin at morning and pumpkin at noon," a 1630s ditty ran. "If it was not for pumpkin we should be undone." To some, homegrown beer was not just necessity, but rebellion, a thumbed nose at British imports. But that doesn't mean it was any good.

In fact, it was—and too often still is—awful. Here's why: Sweet and nutty when roasted, pumpkins turn sour when their sugars ferment into beer, giving off an unpleasant cidery tang. In fact, one of the first published recipes for pumpkin beer (from 1771) included an ingredient that was more akin to pumpkin cider: pressed, fermented gourd juice. Brewers hid that taste with a mix of boiled spices like cinnamon, ginger and nutmeg. And that's where it all went wrong.

A brewer I know says that if you can taste a single ingredient in a beer, there's too much of it. Beer is a tippy boat: paddle too hard and it flops into the deep. Belgian wheat beers are regular offenders, tasting occasionally like coriander or orange-peel soup. With pumpkin beers, the opposite happens. Few are one-note—no nutmeg soup here—but their pumpkin-pie potpourri can be even more intense than a single, overemphasized spice. Call it the Candle Shoppe Gestalt: The blend of scents is worse than any individual offender.

And yet that pumpkin-spice canon, established centuries ago, has persisted ever since, analogous now with the season itself. Thankfully, that's changing, as brewers bring new ingredients, wild yeasts and, yes, a subtler spice rack to this style of brew. It's high time for another rebellion in beer: a pumpkin ale that actually tastes great. Here are five that are leading the way.

A new patch of pumpkin beers is proving they're not just a seasonal gimmick.

***Dogfish Head Punkin Ale*** // 7% ABV Named after the bizarre tradition of Punkin Chunkin, in which catapults hurl gourds across a Delaware field, Dogfish Head's classic is a dry, meaty brown ale. The pumpkin provides body-building starch, the spices are restrained and a touch of brown sugar dries the beer out so it snaps like brittle toffee and crunching leaves.

***La Parcela Jolly Pumpkin*** // 5.9% ABV The American masters of wild yeast live up to their name, finally, with a pumpkin beer. Of course, it's so much more than that: a nose of mulled cider, dusted at the finish with cocoa; a sour bite, not from pumpkin but from wild bacteria; and toasted, even slightly burnt, spice to tie it up.

***Uinta Oak Jacked*** // 10.31% ABV Part of Uinta's Crooked Line series of special releases, Oak Jacked takes the Salt Lake City brewery's Punk'n Harvest Pumpkin Ale, bumps up its strength to 10.31% (get it?) and ages it in oak barrels for six months. The originally perfume-y beer bulks up and mellows out, its spices hidden behind a velvet wave of vanilla-streaked liquor.

***Smuttnose Pumpkin Ale*** // 5.6% ABV More spicy than spiced—this ale from Portsmouth, N.H., is bracing and bitter. Less aromatic than most, with more noticeable hops, it's not an obvious pumpkin beer, but not quite anything else. Who says autumn can't also be refreshing? This is the only pumpkin beer that rightly comes in a six-pack.

***The Bruery Autumn Maple*** // 10% ABV The best pumpkin beer in the patch isn't a pumpkin beer at all. Fall tradition for these SoCal brewers means staying up all night to roast 600 pounds of sweet potatoes for every batch. They bring a nuttiness and yes, a slight cidery sourness, but it's wonderfully offset by earthy molasses, maple syrup and a fruity Belgian yeast.