

HANK Speaks Again... So Listen By Hank

To sleep, to sleep, perchance to dream

(this dream sequence brought to you by William Shakespeare and by me. He is dead and therefore I will ALSO drink his share of the gifts of beer given by a grateful readership)

AMONG THE CRAFT-BEER COGNOSCENTI, pilsner has long been considered a dirty word, sullied by its very popularity, synonymous with lowest-common-denominator, industrialized swill. Big, bold flavors were more distinguishing for the fledgling craft-brew industry than subtlety and snap. But in the last few years, the tide has begun to turn, and some craft breweries are visiting the style for the first time.

Pilsners were born to be crowd-pleasers, and that's the problem. What is now the most popular style of beer in the world was invented in 1842 by a cantankerous German brewer named Josef Groll, hired by the concerned citizens of Plzen to do something about that Bohemian town's shoddy beer (four years earlier, a mob dumped barrels of it at the steps of city hall). Groll applied lagering, a technique of aging beer cold that was popular in his homeland, to local ingredients: peppery Saaz hops; delicate Moravian barley; soft, limestone-filtered water. What he made was brilliant gold, kissed with honey and the herbal spice of summer grass. It could only come from Plzen, and it was so named.

Site-specific branding didn't keep imitators at bay. Germans made their pilsners lighter and more bitter. American brewers, faced with heartier barley and harder water, cut theirs with rice and corn. Pilsner quickly flooded the globe, as technological innovation made it easier to produce. It was hauled on the world's first railroads, chilled in the first refrigerators, analyzed in the first yeast labs.

Five Imperial Pilsners to Try Now

It takes a steady, scientific hand to make pilsner right—in such a light beer, slight flaws are glaring. And it takes patience. Those delicate flavors of sugar and spice mature over months of aging in caves or, these days, perfectly calibrated tanks. Most of America's first craft breweries lacked caves and tanks, so few made pilsner, preferring instead more forgiving, quicker-to-market ales.

At times, craft brewing's worship at the altar of excess can seem like the old "Spinal Tap" joke: This beer "goes to 11!" When that beer is pilsner—a picture of subtlety when made well—cranking the volume seems silly and unnecessary. And yet imperial pilsners, a bolder cousin to the pilsners you may be used to, offer a balance that is sometimes rare in the craft beer world: energy and indulgence, refreshment and reward.

A few brewers play it straight with pilsner, like Tröegs, whose German-style Sunshine Pils could tempt the pickiest Bavarian. Others go big, heaping on the sweet, succulent grains and balancing their fruity after-burn with an extra dose of rounded tannins from European hops, more full than American hops' sharp citrus and pine, which define IPAs. No, imperial pilsners are not made for a day in the sun, behind a mower or beside a grill. But when the tiki torches are ablaze and the burgers are hot, an imperial pilsner is a firework finish to a day well spent.

Some of the best are:

- O'Dell's Double Pilsner 8.1%
- Magic Hat over the Pils 8.1%
- Gordon Biersch's Imperial Pilsner Brau 6.5%
- Heavy Seas Small Craft Warning 7%
- Dogfish Head My Antonio 7.5%
- The Bruery Humulus lager 7.2%