

Hank Speaks... So Listen

by Hank Bienert

Here's an article I read awhile back on the BEERSMITH blog; I share it to start YET ANOTHER year off with my usual generosity Russian Imperial Stout Recipes by Brad Smith

This week on the BeerSmith blog we turn to the Russian Imperial Stout beer style, the king of stout beers. We will explore the origin, history, beer style and some sample Imperial Stout beer recipes for home brewers.

History

Imperial Russian Stouts were actually brewed in England for the export to the court of the Tsars of Russia in the 18th century. A high, malty alcohol content and high hop rate were intended to preserve the beer and also prevent it from freezing during its shipboard trip across the Baltic sea. Thrale's brewery of London brewed the style preferred by Catherine II's court in Russia.

Later Thrale's brewery changed hands and was taken over by Courage, renaming the beer as Courage Imperial Russian Stout. The style has a high alcohol content of 9-10% alcohol by volume. High gravity Russian stout's are also brewed by Guinness and Boston Beer Company (Samuel Adams). [Ref: Wikipedia]

While the style was regularly brewed in the 18th and early 19th century, this beer has enjoyed resurgence the last few years with the rise of microbreweries.

The Russian Imperial Stout Style

Russian Imperial Stout is a rich, deep, complex beer with full bodied flavor. It has a rich dark malt flavor that may vary from dry chocolate to slightly burnt. A slight alcoholic warmth is normal. It may have a fruity profile including complex dark fruits such as plum, raisin or prune flavors. Like many British beers, it can have a caramel, bready or toasted flavor as well with roast malt complexity.

Color ranges from dark brown to jet black (30-40 SRM). Alcohol content is usually high (8-12% alcohol by volume) with a high starting gravity (1.075 to 1.115 OG). Bitterness generally runs high to balance the malty flavor (50-90 IBUs), but hop flavor should only be low to medium overall. Many US versions have higher bitterness. Carbonation is generally low to moderate. [Ref: BJCP Style Guide]

Brewing an Imperial Stout

Imperial stouts start with a well-modified pale malt base, generally using UK pale malts. The pale base typically makes up 75% of the grain bill. Roasted malts of all kind are added, usually comprising of a mix of moderately colored caramel malt, chocolate malt and roast malt to provide complexity, body and flavor. Together these make up the remaining 25% of the malt bill. Other malts such as Munich and aromatic are occasionally used, though roast malts make up the bulk of the specialty grain bill.

Traditional variations use classic English hops such as Fuggles or BC Goldings, though American microbreweries often also use US hop variants. Hops are typically added as a single boil addition, since a lingering hop aroma and flavor is not needed here. Instead a high hop rate during the boil provides the bitterness needed to offset the malt.

Since roast malts provide a very acidic addition, it is not uncommon to use slightly alkaline water when brewing imperial stouts. Traditionally, English Ale yeast or Imperial Stout yeast provides the fruity complexity required for this style, though again some American variants use high attenuation US yeast variants for a cleaner finish. Very high gravity options may require high gravity yeast such as champagne or barley wine yeast.

Imperial stouts are fermented at ale temperatures in the 63-68 F range, carbonated at low to moderate carbonation rates, and stored at ale temperatures or lower (as they were during the icy trip across the Baltic). Often Imperials require an extended aging period to achieve full maturity due to the high starting gravity.

Imperial Stout Recipes

There are some sample recipes on the BeerSmith Recipe Page:

Cossack Imperial Stout – All Grain

Jay's 'One at a Time' Imperial Stout – All Grain

Spiced Imperial Stout – All Grain

As always, constructive comments are welcome via the Hopline ... for those uncomfortable with readin' n' writin' big words, please continue to mumble during meetings from the back row which is where I like to sit/sip/mumble...and where traditionally (NEW MEMBERS PAY HEED!!) free beer should be delivered to ME, your thirsty, worthy scribe.

THNX Hank