

Helpful Bits from Greg Hackenberg

This episode is titled 'A question of Balance' (anyone who gets the music reference without Google wins a prize; sadly it won't be a Ploughmans lunch with a nice Aston Manor cider). Are You Sitting Comfortably? Good.

"I would give all my fame for a pot of ale and safety."-Shakespeare, 'King Henry V.'

So to start episode 8, what is it that IMHO strikes me as the hallmark of British brewing? Balance. But to understand what that all means, you need to understand what it is you're trying to balance. So this month I am going to focus in that most basic and masterful of British beers, the Pale Ale.

Pale ale has a long and sordid history in the UK. In fact, for the first few centuries of its existence, the definition of "Pale" seemed to change every few decades. What we now know as British (and Burton) pale ale is mid-20th century incarnation of the late Victorian tradition which took shape in the Edwardian era. I'd never thought I'd live to be a hundred, so the beer has had some legs, despite a couple of world wars, rationing, taxes and puritanical prudes lowering the strength. It takes three forms (and this is one of the BJCP gets right) **Ordinary**, **Best**, and the most recent, **Extra Special Bitter**, distinguished mostly by taking the gravity Higher and Higher and adjusting the hops and other ingredients to maintain the all-important Balance. Fancy a pint? Good!

Pub notes...You walk into that cheery looking pub. Lost among the tap of mass market YFS lagers you will see an array of beautiful turned wood or ceramic tap handles each marked with a placard resembling a beer label.

Question. What makes up a good British Pale Ale? Easy, our chief weapon is...Base Malt...and hops, our two weapons are base malt, hops, and yeast... our three weapons are base malt, hops, yeast and specialty malt...amongst our weaponry are base malt, earthy hops, a characteristic yeast and touches of specialty malt, and some modified sugars and adjuncts. This time around I'm going to focus in the following the Base malts, in detail and give you an outline of the others for now.

British Base malt for Beginners

Send Me No Wine, because a good British Pale Ale made with Maris Otter is the bomb (British expression, the opposite of "bombing"). Yes you can (and should) use other pale malts, but this is an exceptional, world class, malt, the choice product of the brewer's art, if you will. All British pale malts are kilned slightly darker than a US two row and have a slightly toastier flavor that provides an essential character found in good British Ales. Maris Otter ups that and adds a full malty flavor with biscuit notes. There are several maltsters producing Maris Otter pale malts, each one has a slightly different character, so I'm told. I have not compared them side by side, but any one you can get is going to be great. Another option is Golden Promise, a Scottish malt, made by one small malting outfit, TF& Sons. This is another great choice with a clean malty flavor, not as biscuity as Maris Otter, but a great character of its own.

But rest assured the other British two-row malts that are available will make a fine beer. They can even be combined with Maris Otter or Golden Promise, or other kinds pale malts for a more complex malt flavor. British beers historically used multiple malts, and Like a Gypsy Of A Strange and Distant Time, even continental malts as portion of the grain bill. So feel free to use other 2-row malts. The American and Belgian Pales are bit lighter in color and a slightly different flavor range then the British types. If all you can get is American, I would substitute mild malt for about a quarter of the bill to up the flavor and add a little color. Mild malt is, as you might suspect, used a lot in British Mild/Brown ales. It is another step darker than British pale, and can be used as a base malt itself. I'll have a bit more on it at some point later.

Now, why has he been going on about base malt, I'm Just a Singer In a Rock and Roll Band? Just sit down and Ride my See-Saw a bit and I'll explain. One of the key factors to making authentic British Pale

ales, despite what you may have heard, is that they are base-malt-centric beers. That is, the primary source of flavor is derived from your base grain, in this case good English Pale Malt (and yes, it really is good, otherwise it would not make good beers).

You see, this applies to a number of British beer styles, but none so much as the “simple” pale ale. Simple? Simple as crossing Niagara Falls on a tightrope, all you have to do is walk in a straight line, right? But really, those British Pale malts are the workhorse of Brown Ales, Porters, Stouts, just about every one of them. While you don’t need the Maris Otter in a porter, you do need a bit of that British Pale Malt character to make a convincing example.

So you have a base, what now? Specialty Malts, Adjuncts, Sugar! Now there are quite a number of great, and I mean spectacular, pale ales that are made with only base malt, but in a small scale non-commercial operation, I think a bit of depth and a touch of character is in order.

Specialty Malts: Crystal malt in the 40-80 degree range, some nice toasty or biscuity specialty malts are a welcome addition. But the word on these is restraint. Listen to The Voice within and add touches of these, a ½ pound here a ½ pound there at the most.

Adjuncts: Never Comes the Day where a Brit Brewer has a qualm at adding some flaked maize for slight residual sweetness, flaked barley, torrefied wheat, wheat malt for body and head retention or other adjuncts to their beers.

Sugars: A number of British Beers often include treacle or invert sugar in grades of darkness similar to Belgian sugar syrups. These add color and a particular molasses and caramelized sugar note.

Forget that American “add a bucket of this and couple of packs of that, hell, another bucket of this” and think like a Brit. As Pink Floyd said “Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way.” Keep these additions to no more than about 20-25% of the total bill and Bob’s your Uncle (I like that expression... and I had an Uncle Bob, introduced me to Guinness bottled stout. But I digress).

Okay, what does all this mean? I’m going to regale you with a recipe of sorts, so you can see how this all balances out.

“Brewers Reward” Best Bitter

BJCP 8B: Special/Best/Premium Bitter,

O.G. 1048 (75% efficiency) 36 IBU’s

7 lb. Maris Otter

8 oz. Crystal 60

8 oz. Wheat Malt

4 oz. Invert sugar No.1/Demerara Sugar

1.0 oz. Challenger, 60 min

.50 oz. EK Goldings, 30 min

.50 oz. EK Goldings, dry hop

Yeast WPL002 English Ale

Got it? Solid base of Maris Otter goodness with a few accents, a nice background bitterness and hop flavor and dry hop aroma on top. The yeast is the Fuller’s and will add some nice fruity esters and leave a clean malty sweetness in the finish. Now, this is not one of mine, but it sure could be. This comes (with a little updating) from that Legend of a Mind, David Line. He wrote what must be considered the first modern guide to home brewing in 1974, developing small scale methods of mashing and sparging, when “all grain” was just a marketing slogan on a cereal box.

Next time, how to brew this puppy.