

The best of the brews reviewed this year

BY LAUREN BUZZEO

Like the beers themselves, the Top 25 Beers list is all about balance. Sure, numeric scores and pricing play important roles, but of similar consideration is the representation of various brands, styles, countries, production sizes and overall product availability.

This list is not the top 25 beers of all time. Instead, it is a look at some of the most exciting selections tasted for our Beer Buying Guides over the past 12 months. The majority of beers submitted and reviewed were domestic, as the American craft-beer scene continues to thrive, though there are some stellar international bottlings included, echoing the growing interest in traditional, high-quality imports.

While many of the beers on the list have excellent distribution, there are a few items that might not be available across all states or are extremely limited in production. These are beer treasures that are definitely worth the hunt—there's no shame in planning a getaway out of the desire to visit a buzzy beer market or hot brewery.

Be sure to check out our online Buying Guide to see what else was reviewed this year. But for now, cheers to the best that this year's reviews had to offer.



JENS JOHNSON

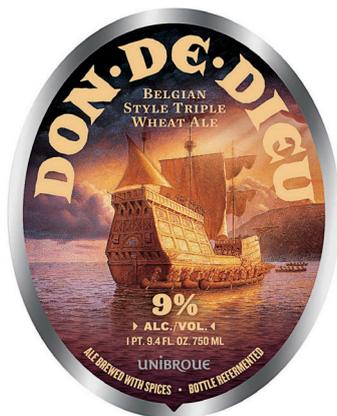
1

95 Great Divide Espresso Oak Aged Yeti (American Double/Imperial Stout; Great Divide Brewing Co., CO). This Yeti Series selection is a bold and powerful stunner. It's infused with Denver's own Pablo's espresso, the prominent coffee character marrying harmoniously with the beer's roasted malt core and additional notes of vanilla bean, Baker's chocolate, cocoa powder, caramelized sugar, leather and charred oak. The mouthfeel is velvety and smooth, while a dank, resinous hop profile unfolds on the close alongside similarly dry flavors of bitter cocoa, coffee and cigar-box spice. It's wonderfully dense, flavorful and forward now, but some cellaring for another year or two after release could coax out additional layers of complexity.

abv: 9.5%

Price: \$12/22 oz

2

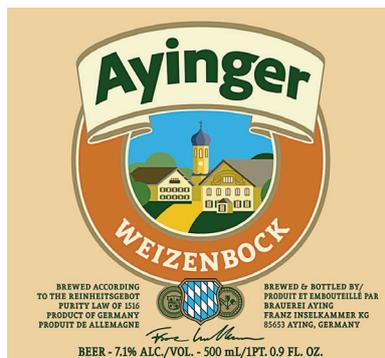


96 Unibroue Don de Dieu (Belgian Strong Pale Ale; Unibroue, Canada). This is an intense and flavorful yet remarkably balanced selection that pours a pristine golden color with a frothy white head that shows good retention. Initial scents of orange, wheat, apricot, peach and yeasty spice waft from the glass and continue through to the medium-bodied palate. A subtle hint of wild animal or barnyard character weaves in and out of perception, like a pleasant tease. Bright carbonation helps keep the mouthfeel lively and refreshing, while the finish is spicy and slightly dry, with only a hint of alcohol warmth.

abv: 9%

Price: \$8/750 ml

3



94 Ayinger Weizenbock Authentic Bavarian Weizen Bock (Weizenbock, Brauerei Aying, Germany). This is a classic wheat ale, but brewed to be as strong as a bock or double bock, so the resulting selection is one of serious depth and intensity, while still remaining clean and refreshing. It pours a hazy amber-tangerine color, with a thick, frothy off-white head that really lingers. The aromas are all wheat beer—yeasty spice, banana, orange peel, apple and a touch of bubble gum. Those notes carry through to the medium-weight palate, supported by the core of bready malt and toasted wheat that are lifted on the close by bright, slightly prickly carbonation. Overall, this is a rich and decadent yet surprisingly drinkable and well-balanced brew. Merchant du Vin.

abv: 7.1%

Price: \$4/500 ml

4

94 Anchor Porter (American Porter; Anchor Brewing, CA). This traditional, balanced porter pours almost black, with a thick, tan-colored head. The nose suggests an attractive, layered mix of dried dark fruits—prunes, figs, raisins—roasted malt, coffee and bittersweet cocoa powder. It's flavorful and creamy, with a lifting note of citrus oil on the close, followed by a dry, bitter chocolate flavor. It's bold and flavorful, yet surprisingly smooth and easy to drink.

abv: 5.6%

Price: \$12/12 oz 6 pack

5

94 Maine Beer Company Zoe (American Amber/Red Ale; Maine Beer Company, ME). Labeled as "Our happy, hoppy, amber ale," this is a quintessential American amber, with a forward and pleasantly pronounced hop character and balanced but noticeable alcohol. It's immediately welcoming, leading with seductive notes of sticky hops, citrus oils, toasted nuts, caramel malt, toffee and a touch of pine resin. The full, round palate is simultaneously bitter and rich, and the balance between the forward hop characteristics and sweet, malty core of the brew is impeccable. Notes of chocolate, dried

red fruit, caramel and toasted grain unfold on the finish first, but are then countered by lingering final notes of grapefruit pith and pine.

abv: 7.2%

Price: \$8/16 oz

6

95 Alaskan Brewing Co. 2015 Smoked Porter (American Porter; Alaskan Brewing Co., AK). Never one to disappoint, ABC's annual vintage-dated Smoked Porter is always a winner, delicious both upon release but also after years in the cellar. This 2015 release is still young and bold, with upfront aromas of smoked malt and campfire that are grounded by notes of dried black fruits, raisin, tobacco leaf and chocolate. The big, lush palate boasts a smooth and creamy texture, with immensely attractive flavors of malted milk balls, chocolate syrup, molasses and roasted coffee beans. Hints of s'mores and hickory-smoked bacon linger sweetly on the close. A hedonistic pleasure to enjoy now, this will only continue to gain complexity and nuance in the years, and even decade, ahead. *Cellar Selection.*

abv: 6.5%

Price: \$9/22 oz

7

94 Chimay Grande Réserve Blue (Belgian Strong Dark Ale; Bières de Chimay, Belgium). Originally brewed as a Christmas beer in 1948, this dark and flavorful brew has wide distribution and is thankfully relatively easy to find across the U.S. It's loaded with rich, caramel aromas and flavors, with supporting notes of baking spice, dried cherry and date, like a holiday fruit cake. Hints of buttered banana and caramelized sugar unfold on the palate, resulting in a flavor reminiscent of Bananas Foster. The mouthfeel is smooth and creamy, with superb balance and little warmth despite the beer's significant alcohol, making it sinfully easy to drink. Linger-ing sweet-spice and chocolate notes grace the long finish. Manneken-Brussel Imports.

abv: 9%

Price: \$15/750 ml

8

94 Stone Xocoveza (Milk/Sweet Stout; Stone Brewing Co., CA). A distinct and beloved seasonal selection, Xocoveza—a milk stout brewed with cocoa, coffee, peppers, vanilla, cinnamon, nutmeg and milk sugar—is Stone's nod to Mexican hot chocolate, and boy does it deliver on that concept. It's definitely a spicy selection, boasting forward aromas and flavors of the beer's special ingredients alongside additional hints of sweet smoke, charred oak and roasted malt. The sip is evolving and layered, starting with rich, fudgy brownie flavors that then transition to espresso and baking spice before landing firmly on a lingering chili-like, peppery heat.

abv: 8.1%

Price: \$18/12 oz 6 pack

9

92 Deschutes Hop Trip A Fresh Hop Pale Ale (American Pale Ale; Deschutes Brewery, OR).

This selection marks the 10th year that the Deschutes crew made the “trip” to pick, bag, load and dump freshly harvested hops into their kettles, all within a few hours, to create this brew. The resulting selection is fresh and—you guessed it—hop forward, with supporting notes of ripe peach, apricot, pine, orange oil and tea leaves. The medium-bodied palate is rich and smooth, with abundant citrusy notes of tangerine zest, orange rind and grapefruit oil that are married harmoniously to the clean biscuit and cracker malt core. A sticky, slightly resinous hop flavor lingers on the finish, pleasantly bitter and partnered with a tea-like astringency.

abv: 6.1%

Price: \$12/12 oz 6 pack

10



94 Samuel Smith's The Famous Taddy Porter (English Porter; Samuel Smith Old Brewery [Tadcaster], United Kingdom). This is a classic, clean, very drinkable and well-balanced porter. It pours a dark brown color, with a full tan-colored head that lingers nicely. The medium-weight mouthfeel is tasty and attractive, with ample carbonation to lift the rich chocolate malt, molasses and raisin characters. Aromas and flavors of roasted malt, toasted nut, toffee, bitter cocoa and very soft hops carry through to the nutty, smoky finish. Merchant du Vin.

abv: 5%

Price: \$5/550 ml

11

93 Blackberry Farm Classic Saison (Saison/Farmhouse Ale; Blackberry Farm Brewery, TN). A classic, clean example of the saison style, this pours a hazy straw color with a billowy head. Initial scents of yeasty spice, white pepper, bread dough and a touch of fresh grass waft from the glass, with a faint secondary hint of barnyard. The medium-bodied mouthfeel offers ample carbonation, which keeps the creamy flavors of banana, pear and honeyed lemon lifted and brisk through the spicy, dry finish. The coriander, pepper and yeasty

characteristics become more apparent with warming. A well-balanced and complex offering.

abv: 6%

Price: \$17/750 ml

12

94 Cuvée des Jacobins Rouge Flemish Sour Ale (Flanders Red Ale; Brewery Omer Vander Ghinste, Belgium).

This is a pure, fully sour beer, a classic example of the traditional Belgian style. Fermented 18 months in *foudres* with wild yeasts and bacteria, it is a powerhouse of beautiful, funky complexity. The nose is a bounty of earthy, mouth-puckering notes of cherry, green apple, lemon pith and hay, with a distinct and pleasant red-wine vinegar edge. The palate is tart and lifted, with assertive notes of lemon and sour cherry juice framed by hints of dried herbs, wood spice and apple skin. It's well balanced and refreshing, and will pair masterfully with a rib-eye or beef stew. Artisanal Imports, Inc.

abv: 5.5%

Price: \$8/330 ml

13

94 Bruery Terreux 2016 Confession Collaboration Series with Fess Parker Winery & Vineyard (American Wild Ale; Bruery Terreux, CA).

A barrel-aged sour ale (brewed in part by the Fess Parker team) blended and fermented with juice pressed from Fess Parker's Riesling grapes (harvested in part by The Bruery team), this is truly collaboration at its finest. A slightly hazy, light gold color, with brilliant little bubbles that stream from the center of the glass, it opens with bright, vinous aromas of tart grape, firm apricot, underripe peach, barnyard and fresh-cut grass. The medium-bodied palate offers moderate carbonation and a seam of acidity that work in harmony to lift the stone-fruit tones and enliven the finish. While this is perfectly drinkable now, some cellaring will allow the tart, lactic notes to mellow a bit and additional complexities to develop.

abv: 9.4%

Price: \$25/750 ml

14

**92 Brasserie du Bocq Blanche de Namur (Witbier; Du Bocq Brewery, Belgium).**

Named for Princess Blanche of Namur, born in the area in 1320 and later married to King Magnus IV of Norway, this

is a traditional wit that offers upfront aromas and flavors of orange peel, lemony hop, underripe stone fruit and yeasty spice. It's faint golden-yellow in color, with a cloud-like white head that shows good retention. The palate is smooth and approachable, with a medium-minus body and brisk, lifting carbonation that keeps it clean and refreshing. Subtle hints of coriander, clove and earthy, softly mentholated herbs tease on the finish. Merchant du Vin.

abv: 4.5%

Price: \$9/750 ml

15

**92 The Lost Abbey Red Barn Ale (Saison/Farmhouse Ale; The Lost Abbey, CA).**

This is a thirst-quenching, refreshing yet complex and layered brew, which is not surprising coming from this stellar California brewery. It pours a sunny golden color with some haze and a frothy, lingering white head. Pungent, tart, citrusy aromas lead the nose, with supporting notes of underripe peach, coriander, white pepper and barnyard. The earthy, funky characteristics lead on the palate, complemented by assertive carbonation, but are then followed by a soft, malty nuttiness and ripe orchard-fruit richness that carries through to the dry finish, which resonates in yeasty and peppery spice tones.

abv: 6.7%

Price: \$15/750 ml

16

91 Smuttynose Old Brown Dog Ale (American Brown Ale; Smuttynose Brewing Company, NH).

Part of smutty's year-round lineup, this pours a gorgeous mahogany color, with a thick tan head that falls quickly. It's a harmonious and well-balanced brew, as initial scents of sweet malt, canned brown bread, toasted raisin bread, brown sugar and molasses abound on the nose and carry through to the smooth, medium-weight mouth. Hints of cola spice, toasted pecan and dark cherry dance on the creamy palate. Medium carbonation helps to keep the mouthfeel from feeling cloyingly sweet, while a pleasant bittersweet cocoa and black tea astringency unfolds on the finish.

abv: 6.5%

Price: \$10/12 oz 6 pack

17

93 Vander Ghinste Flemish Sour Ale Red Brown (Flanders Oud Bruin; Brewery Omer Vander Ghinste, Belgium). This well-balanced Flemish ale pours a beautiful dark red-brown color, with garnet flecks when held to the light. The intense bouquet offers a gamut of aromas, from tart cherry, green grape, underripe banana and balsamic vinegar to notes of caramel malt, prune, brown sugar and cocoa powder. The palate offers a similar interplay between the tart citrus and vinegary characteristics and the rich malt and ripe fruit flavors, a fine balancing act that is masterfully executed. Notes of dried tree bark, leather, bitter cocoa and wood spice grace the long, dry finish. Artisanal Imports, Inc.
abv: 5.5% **Price:** \$8/330 ml

18

91 Harpoon Flannel Friday (Amber Ale; Harpoon Brewery, MA & VT). A fun beer that's seasonally appropriate, this brand new fall selection in Harpoon's lineup is a hopped-up amber ale that screams "drink me while you rake leaves." With Cascade and Citra hop additions, there are bright hop aromas of citrus peel and pine upfront, with supporting tones of caramel malt, ripe peach and apricot. The medium-bodied palate shows off the malty richness of the style's core, while the hops take command once again through the pleasantly bitter finish. This is a welcome alternative to the more one-note, malt-driven autumnal releases.
abv: 5.7% **Price:** \$10/12 oz 6 pack

19

91 Tallgrass Brewing Co. Raspberry Jam Berliner Weiss (Berliner Weissbier; Tallgrass Brewing Co., KS). A new, seasonal addition to Tallgrass's Explorer Series lineup, this raspberry-flavored Berliner Weisse is perfect for warm-weather enjoyment. Scents of tart raspberries dominate the bouquet, with supporting notes of citrus peel, fresh wheat and crisp salinity. The light-bodied palate is bright and refreshing, with lively effervescence and tangy flavors of sour raspberry, gooseberry and lime leaf. It's well balanced and very easy to drink, and with a low alcohol level, it's a sessionable selection that could easily become your new go-to for summer.
abv: 4.3% **Price:** \$13/12 oz 4 pack

20

92 Dogfish Head Fort (Fruit/Vegetable Beer; Dogfish Head Craft Brewery, DE). Bottled on October 24, 2015 (meaning this would be considered the 2015 vintage of the brew), this fruit beer is not for the faint of heart: It's a Belgian-style ale fermented with over a ton of raspberries that boasts

some serious overall concentration and strength. A stunning orange-amber color, with a thick off-white head, assertive notes of juicy raspberries abound, accented by hints of tart citrus, cranberry and yeasty spice. The medium-bodied palate is slightly sticky and viscous, but not as full as one might anticipate given the alcohol. Flavors of sour raspberries, tart orange-cranberry sauce and some yeasty funk carry through to the long, dry and warming finish. A cellar-worthy beer worth trying after 2017.

abv: 17%**Price:** \$12/12 oz

21

91 Omer Traditional Blond Ale (Belgian Strong Pale Ale; Brewery Bockor, Belgium). Omer's Blond is made with malted barley from the Loire and three varieties of hops from Germany, Slovenia and the Czech Republic. It pours a slightly hazy golden color, with a white head that lingers and leaves beautiful lacing behind with each sip. The nose leads with subtle aromas of fresh grain and hop flower, backed by notes of lemony citrus, hay, apple flesh and bread dough. The dry palate offers more of the same in terms of flavor, with additional tones of ripe stone fruit that lend depth. Assertive carbonation helps to counter the rich malt and fruity core as well as the weight of the alcohol. Spicy hints of white pepper and baking spice grace the just-bitter finish. Artisanal Imports, Inc.

abv: 8%**Price:** \$20/11.2 oz 4 pack

22



90 Samuel Adams Noble Pils (American Pilsner; The Boston Beer Company, MA). For the brewery's twist on this classic Czech style, Bohemian spring barley is used, as are all five Noble hop varieties. The resulting brew is remarkably balanced and refreshing yet certainly hop centric, with pronounced notes of orange slice, grapefruit peel and fresh pine needle that support the clean grain and cracker malt core. Medium carbonation keeps the mouthfeel fresh and vibrant, ending lightly dry and with just a kiss of hop astringency. This is a no-brainer for entertaining, as it's easy-pleasing but also will pair with a wide variety of foods.

abv: 4.9%**Price:** \$11/12 oz 6 pack

23

90 Captain Lawrence Liquid Gold (Belgian Pale Ale; Captain Lawrence Brewing Co., NY). This Westchester County (New York) staple pours a brilliant gold color, with exceptional clarity and a nice white head that falls to decent lacing. The malt profile is upfront on the nose, with forward scents of clean biscuit and cracker alongside additional notes of just-dried hay, lemon, banana and spicy yeast. A touch of wild funk unfolds throughout, with a subtle animal sensation and acidic twang that refreshes the palate. The medium-bodied mouthfeel is lifted by ample carbonation, while the finish is dry and spicy.
abv: 7% **Price:** \$11/12 oz 6 pack

24

90 Coronado Brewing Co. Punk'In Dublic (Pumpkin Ale; Coronado Brewing Co., CA). Brewed with brown sugar, honey, cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice and plenty of pumpkin, this is pretty much everything you'd expect in a pumpkin ale—basically, rich, velvety pumpkin pie in a glass. Mahogany in color, it opens with a warm, spicy bouquet, offering everything from the ingredient list. The mouthfeel is smooth and slightly creamy—not overly sweet—displaying a masterful balance between the fresh pumpkin purée flavors and baking spice additions that all combine harmoniously with the caramel-malt core and subtle hop astringency. A pleasant alcohol warmth marries the beer's spicy streak, lingering long on the toasty finish.
abv: 8% **Price:** \$12/12 oz 6 pack

25

90 Victory Golden Monkey (Tripel; Victory Brewing Company, PA). This is a bold, full, creamy beer, as a tripel should be. A gorgeous clear orange-gold color in the glass, it opens with a warm bouquet of spiced orange, honey and tangy wheat. The mouthfeel is round and generous, with a sweet spiced-citrus flavor that's framed by softer hints of honeysuckle, white tea and ginger. The warmth and spice of the finish lifts the ripe flavors and slightly viscous texture off the palate.
abv: 9.5% **Price:** \$14/12 oz 6 pack