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what ales you? the cure for lacklustre lager

High chocolate and creamy caramel - freshly roasted coffee tart apples and grapefruit. The clean tang of juniper on a misty Rocky Mountain morning. It's not a new coffeehouse in Canmore - it's beer. Or more precisely, it's ale.

Though the once-ubiquitous ale is staging a comeback, more than 90 percent of the beer sold in Canada is still lager. While lager can be a wonderful, complex beverage, most of the lagers we drink are lacklustre: ice-cold, bland and flavourless, prompting many people to proclaim that they don't like beer. But give beer another chance. Discover the ancient, aromatic, flavourful world of ale.

What the 'ale are we talking about?

Beer can be divided into two broad categories: ale and lager. From a scientific perspective, the only thing that differentiates them is the type of yeast used in fermentation. Ale yeast (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*) is also known as top-fermenting yeast because after it has finished fermenting the sugars in the beer, it floats to the surface. Lager yeast (*Saccharomyces uvarum*), also known as bottom-fermenting yeast, sinks to the bottom of the beer when fermentation is nearing completion.

At first, this may seem like a meaningless distinction, but ale yeast tends to work faster at higher temperatures and produces chemicals called esters. These esters, while themselves flavourful, also allow the brewer to use a variety of ingredients that work with the yeast to create more flavourful beers.

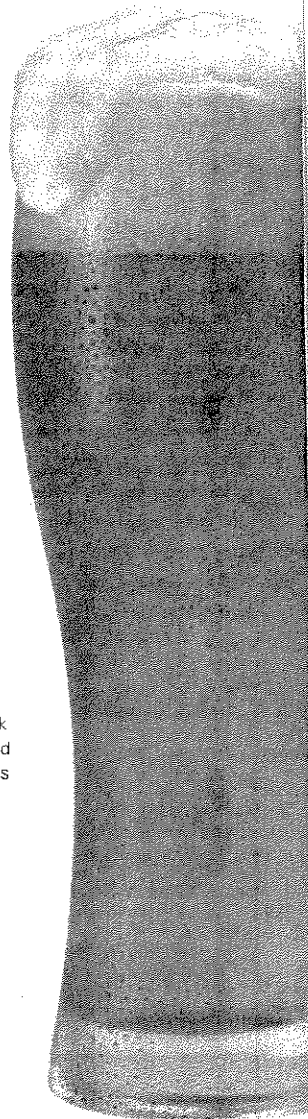
Lagers generally possess cleaner, softer flavours, making them perfect for mass-marketing. They are the Wonder Bread of beers. There certainly are flavourful lagers and there certainly are bland ales, but as a general rule, if you produce two otherwise identical beers - one an ale and one a lager - the ale will have a more interesting flavour.

Saving the ales

It is ironic that beer drinkers are re-discovering ale. Ale is as old as agriculture itself. Writings dating back to at least 5000 B.C. prove that beer has been around for a long time, and all of it was ale until the Germans discovered lager around 1420 A.D.

The resurrection of ale has been central to the craft-beer movement. Because it has more flavour, it was easy to differentiate from the existing mass-market lagers that dominated the market. As an added benefit, ale ferments faster and can be sold sooner, requiring less storage time in expensive brewing equipment.

So, when local legend Ed McNally opened Big Rock Brewery in 1984, he started with three ales: Traditional, a bitter and a porter. Since Big Rock paved the way, a number of local brewers have followed suit, curing Calgary's bland-beer blues with delicious craft-brewed ales.



What's ale in Calgary

Big Rock McNally's Extra Ale – Twenty-four years after leading the ale revival, Big Rock still makes one of the best beers in the world. But it isn't Traditional or Grasshopper (both ales). Beer lovers should seek out the surprisingly-hard-to-find McNally's Extra Ale. This Irish-style ale is worth the effort. Amber in colour, with orange highlights, this awesome ale features a firm, malty body balanced against a pleasing hop bitterness. Ed wouldn't name a mediocre beer after himself, would he? Find this at the better liquor stores.



Wildwood Pale Ale – Pale ale is so named because, historically, it was pale in comparison to the other beers available at the time. These tended to be brown or black. Wildwood's Pale Ale, available only at the pub and restaurant at which it is brewed (2417 – 4th Street S.W.), is copper coloured and features a gentle hop flavour reminiscent of grapefruit and green apples. It is what the English call a "session ale," brewed with a lower alcohol content so that you can enjoy several pints over a long session at the pub.

Wild Rose Industrial Park Ale – India pale ale is pale ale's younger, but bigger, sibling. Originally brewed with a high alcohol content and high hop levels to withstand the long voyage to India's English colonies, an authentic IPA should be nothing like the light, golden, highly-carbonated lagers that dominate Calgary's tap handles. Calling a beer an IPA doesn't make it one. Wild Rose brews an IPA worthy of the moniker ("Industrial Park Ale" is a pun based on their original location in Foothills Industrial Park). Copper-coloured and high in citric and floral hops, you won't mistake this beer for anything else brewed in Calgary.



Brew Brothers Prairie Steamer Ale – Unfortunately, you have probably never heard of this beer. And if you have heard of it, you probably did not know that you can still get it. This beer is currently available on draft only at select pubs and restaurants. Caramel sweet, yet balanced, Prairie Steamer Ale is a fine beer that everyone seems to love, from people trying craft beer for the first time, to experienced internationally recognized beer judges. Always available at Amsterdam Rhino, 607 – 11th Ave S.W.

Brewsters Blue Monk Barley Wine – Brewsters started as a chain of brewpubs. Although the four pubs in Calgary no longer brew, they continue to serve great beers, now brewed in Edmonton. Barley wine is so named because its alcohol level rivals that of wine. Brewster's version, Blue Monk, is deep amber to brown. It is full-bodied, with a strong molasses flavour and hints of chocolate. Beware – it tastes great, but a half-pint of this 9.9-percent-alcohol giant is enough.

The Campaign for Real Ale, based in England, has devoted itself to preserving traditional English-style ale. "Real ale" is cask-conditioned. This means that it is naturally carbonated in the vessel from which it is served (the cask or bottle) with no artificial carbon dioxide added. Draft real ale must be served either by gravity (poured straight from the cask) or pulled by a hand pump, because the normal method of serving beer using a tank of pressurized carbon dioxide adds more carbon dioxide to the beer. This changes the flavour and texture of the beer. Draft real ale is a rare treat in Calgary. One cask is available each Friday at both **Wildwood Grill & Brewing Company** (2417 – 4th St. S.W.) and **Wild Rose Brewery** (4580 Quesnay Wood Dr. S.W. – at the Calgary Farmers' Market). The cask at both places is tapped around 4 p.m. and when it runs out, you'll have to wait another week for the experience.

Don Tse is a Calgary beer writer who loves Lager and appreciates ale. He has sampled almost 5,000 different beers, but his favourite beer is the one he hasn't yet tried.

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Turducken will be served at the Railway Deli restaurant all Thanksgiving weekend. Avoid disappointment, order now! Last Thanksgiving orders October 5, 2008. We also offer regular free-range and organic turkeys, gift certificates available. We also offer Corporate Christmas Gift Boxes. (Order now and save 10%)



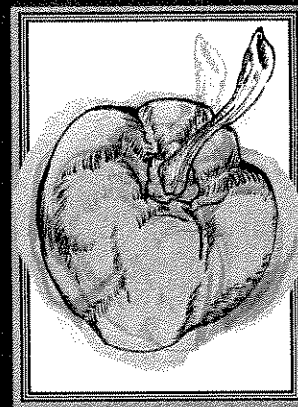
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