

# Winter beers

## WARMING BEERS FOR COLD WEATHER

By Don Tse

As the days grow shorter and the mercury struggles to climb up the thermometer, everyone knows that it's time to stop thinking about beer, which is best served ice cold on a hot summer day. However, "everyone" is wrong and is missing out on some of the most flavourful beers there are.

The fact is, many beers are appropriate for colder days. Many are even specifically designed for cold weather. Because these brews have no need to be crisp or refreshing, they tend to be full-bodied and have complex flavours, offering drinkers an entirely different experience from summer beers.

**Winter Warmers** – "Winter warmer" is a recognized beer style in many brew competitions, confirming the notion that brewers have more than hot summer days on their minds. Beers in this style have relatively high alcohol content – 6 percent alcohol by volume (ABV) or higher – and tend to be on the sweet side, with a greater emphasis on malt than on hops. These malt flavours may be reminiscent of fruits like plums, raisins or figs, even though none are used in brewing the beer. However, spices – particularly nutmeg, cinnamon and ginger – are commonly added to the brew to add festive flair.

**Barley Wine** – Barley wines are not wines. They are beers that have levels of alcohol approaching those of wine. Some, like wines, are vintage dated, reflecting subtle year-to-year variations in the recipe or the quality of the underlying ingredients. Barley wines also age well, so put a few away and pull them out years later when the weather is particularly dreadful. Barley wines warm the spirit by relying on full-bodied, complex, malty flavours that may include nuts, toast, molasses and fruits.

**Smoked Beers** – Few modern homes have wood-burning fireplaces, so chestnuts roasting on an open fire is but a Nat King Cole dream for most. Thankfully, there are smoked beers to fill the void. Smoked beers get their smokiness from the malt used for brewing, which is dried over a smoky fire. Different types of wood, or other fuels, like peat, add different smoke flavours. The smoke may be a subtle accent to the beer, or it may be as smoky as a peaty scotch. Indeed, some of these brews are made from the same kind of smoked malt used to make scotch. If these don't warm you up, you'd better move to a warmer climate.

**Eisbock** – In the mid-1990s, there was a marketing war between Canada's two largest brewers, Molson and Labatt, over their brands of ice beer, basically just regular beer with a slightly higher alcohol content. While there was much hype over these beers, the idea was not new. German brewers have been making ice beers, known as *eisbock*, for centuries. To make *eisbock*, brewers typically start with a *doppelbock*, a strong, rich, dark beer that's between 7 to 10 percent ABV, and freeze it. Since water freezes sooner than alcohol, when the ice is skimmed off, the beer that's left behind (which may now be up to 14 percent ABV) is more concentrated, in terms of both alcohol and flavour. These beers are made in freezing temperatures to be consumed in freezing temperatures.

**Baltic Porter** – Baltic porter is a style of beer that originated from the countries bordering the Baltic Sea. Brewers there know a thing or two about cold weather. Baltic porters range from 5.5 percent ABV all the way up to 9.5 percent ABV. They're dark brown to opaque black and have an oily, almost viscous appearance. Look for thick, rich flavours that coat your tongue and linger long after you've swallowed the beer. Built on a full-bodied malt foundation, these porters' flavours might include nuts, coffee or licorice. There may even be hints of dark fruits, including prunes and currants.

**Gift Packs** – Gift packs don't necessarily feature winter beers, but at this time of year you'll often find liquor store shelves stocked with special packs of beers and glassware meant for gift-giving. This year, for the first time in Calgary, there will even be an advent calendar put together by Craft Beer Importers Canada with punch-out pockets containing 24 different beers. If you have beer-loving friends, this one item completes your Christmas shopping for them. It will be available through well-outfitted liquor stores, and while you're at it, you might as well pick one up for yourself. Taste each day's beer and share your experiences with your friends, because nothing chases away winter blues like the warmth of friendship!

## Brrr... pass me a beer!

Calgary's better liquor stores have a plethora of beers appropriate for winter. Give these beers a try – they'll warm your spirit.

**Samuel Smith's Winter Welcome Ale** – *The name says it all. This British winter ale features a special label every year (usually featuring a winter scene) to warm your soul, and a slightly higher than average alcohol content to warm your body. Brewed in limited quantities each year, the beer epitomizes the winter warmer category. I like it as an accompaniment to turkey.*

**Anchor Our Special Ale** – *Probably the most enduring symbol of Christmas is the spruce tree, so what could be more appropriate to add to a Christmas ale than sprigs of spruce? The recipe for this beer changes each year, but it's consistently full-bodied and malty. The use of spruce as spicing is always obvious, contributing sharp, pine-like flavours. These flavours hold up well to meaty dishes like steak or even game meats.*

**Samichlaus** – *Ho! Ho! Ho! "Samichlaus" is Swiss-German for Santa Claus. This beer is brewed only once a year – on December 6, the anniversary of the feast day of St. Nicholas. This fact alone makes Samichlaus an appropriate beer for winter. But add the fact that the beer weighs in at 14 percent ABV, and there are few beers more appropriate to the season. A rich, sherry-like flavour makes this the perfect accompaniment to chocolate.*

**Wild Rose Cherry Porter** – *Nobody understands Calgary winters like Calgarians. So when local brewery Wild Rose releases its Cherry Porter each year, you should rush out to get some. Made with whole cherries to supplement a chocolaty, malty base beer, Cherry Porter is a festive dessert in a bottle. A chocolate dessert accompaniment would wash the flavours out of this beer, so try it with something simple, like vanilla ice cream.*

**Brewsters Blue Monk Barley Wine** – *I look forward to October every year when Brewsters brewpubs release the latest edition of their Blue Monk Barley Wine. Blue Monk is served only at Brewsters' locations throughout Alberta, so it cannot garner much international acclaim. But it should, because, of the hundreds of barley wines I've sampled, Blue Monk is one of the best. Hints of brandy and brown sugar are balanced against clean hop bitterness and fruity hop flavours. Barley wines like Blue Monk pair beautifully with cheese. ♣*

