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FOOD | BEERS OF THE TIMES

Root, Root, Root for the Home Team

Beer Review: American Lagers

By ERIC ASIMOV MARCH 12, 2015



Spring training for Major League Baseball is well underway, and you might say I've begun my training for spring, jettisoning reflexive winter moves and reawakening old impulses.

Multiple layers for short walks: banished. Covering up in blankets to read a book: no more. Wool: out. Instead, sunshine, baseball, beer.

I'm not one of those baseball fans with season tickets and a sabermetric decoder ring. If I get to a few ballgames over an entire season I will consider myself lucky. Nonetheless, baseball and box scores have nourished me since childhood. It's not the intense sugar rush of an N.F.L. game, but a solid nutritional narrative that, like wine, has the power simultaneously to summon the past and suggest the future.

Except that it's beer, not wine, that goes so naturally with baseball, hot dogs, peanuts and conversation, especially under the ideal conditions of afternoon sunshine.

I came of drinking age as the craft beer revolution was taking off in this country. I am sad to say that I've very rarely had a good beer in a ballpark, certainly not in Yankee Stadium, home of the team I've rooted for all my life. Even as great craft brews are available in many ballparks around the country, Yankee Stadium has remained in thrall to the big distributors, squeezing out all but corporate products.

But spring is the season of unrealistic hopes, so I can fantasize how I'd stock my ideal concession. First, as a ballgame generally calls for multiple beers, you wouldn't want the heavy hitters, contemplative barley wines and other high-alcohol brews.

Instead, I would seek light-bodied, nimble brews, lively and absolutely refreshing. Pilsners, amber ales, English porters, even dry stouts (surprisingly low in alcohol) all fall into this category, as does Kölsch and the occasional [sour beer](#).

And we can't neglect good old American lager, the beer that made Milwaukee, St. Louis and so many other brewing centers famous. My ballpark concession would absolutely require a couple of good lagers, even if this style has been denatured by big brewers, who have used adjuncts to malted barley, like rice and corn, to create so banal a product it can only be enjoyed icy cold, bottle to forehead in the brutal heat.

To the endlessly creative American craft brewer, plain old lager may not seem particularly exciting. Decades ago, with so many great styles of beer left moribund by industrial brewers, craft brewers had compelling reasons to concentrate elsewhere. But little by little, American craft brewers have now taken up the challenge.

With many good examples available, the beer panel recently convened to taste 20 American lagers. Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Chase Rabenn, bar and hospitality manager for Colicchio & Sons in Chelsea, and Matthew Pene, beer director for Eleven Madison Park.

We all agreed signs pointed toward a lager renaissance. "It's just a cool time for lagers," Chase said. Why now?

Aside from an initial distaste for diving into the style that epitomized industrial brewing, many early craft brewers had other reasons for avoiding lagers, one of the two major forms of beer, along with ales. Minimalist lagers, in general, are more difficult to produce than fruity, complex ales. They are subtle, demanding more precision and more specialized equipment. Ales, by contrast, tend to be more forgiving of errors.

It's a little like the syndicated-television landscape [painter Bob Ross](#), who would earnestly advise turning an accidental blob of paint on canvas into "another happy tree." That works for ales, but with minimalist lagers, that ugly blob stands out as a flaw.

Not that all craft brewers avoided the style. Some of the biggest names in the 1970s and '80s specialized in lagers, like Samuel Adams Boston Lager, Brooklyn Lager and Anchor Steam Beer. Anchor now also makes California Lager, a crisp, bracing, refreshing brew that would be a wonderful ballpark companion. It was our No. 2 beer.

Brooklyn Lager was right behind at No. 3, amber to Anchor's golden color with a more pronounced malt flavor, yet lively and juicy. Sam Adams Boston Lager was No. 8, crisp and bitter with a slightly briny quality. This beer has saved me in many an airport lounge around the country.

Defining "American lager" was difficult. American brewers like nothing better than bending and twisting beer styles, so vague terms like American lager bleed into more specific forms of lager like, say, pilsner. Our solution was to include golden and amber lagers, equivalent to German styles like Helles and Dortmunder, while excluding beers labeled pilsner. We also tried, not entirely successfully, to exclude lagers that used cereal adjuncts in the industrial style. As I said, it's hard to be precise. Almost all were 4.5 percent to 5.5 percent alcohol.

Most of the brewers seemed to have reined in their self-expressive impulses. Our brews ranged in color from bright golden to glowing amber, but most were surprisingly straightforward renditions of the style, with the exception of Coney Island Brewing's Seas the Day, a so-called India pale lager, which screamed with the flavors of American hops. It didn't make our cut, but it was a fine rendition, if you like that sort of thing.

The bandwidth of lagers is rather narrow, but they have their refreshing role to play. None did it better than our No. 1 brew, Session Premium Lager from Full Sail Brewing, clean, crisp, lively and fresh. Session, surprisingly, is not made entirely of malted barley. It uses a touch of malted wheat as well. Apparently, lager producers have found ways to be creative without exploding the genre.

Other beers well worth seeking out include the pleasantly bitter District Common from Atlas Brew Works; the golden, malty, hoppy Venn Dortmund-Style Lager from Ninkasi Brewing; the lively, lightly bitter Dortmund Gold Lager from Great Lakes Brewing; and the fresh, grassy Lawnmower Lager from Caldera Brewing. The Lawnmower, by the way, was the lowest in alcohol in the tasting at just 3.9 percent.

Almost all of the beers in our tasting were from craft breweries, but we did have two lagers from historic independent brewers. One, Narragansett Lager, made the cut at No. 10. Made, like most mass-market lagers, with the addition of corn to the malted barley, it was clean and light, though maybe a little vaguely flavored.

I don't suppose most craft beer fans are too excited by lager styles. But as a beer-drinking baseball fan, these are exactly the sort of brews I want at the ballpark. So get on it, Yankee Stadium. And find us a new shortstop while you're at it.

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Recipe Pairing: [Spicy Korean Temple Noodles](#)

TASTING REPORT

FULL SAIL BREWING SESSION PREMIUM LAGER, HOOD RIVER, ORE. ★★★

Golden, beautifully balanced, clean, crisp and refreshing with a restrained bitterness. (\$1.60, 11 oz.)

ANCHOR CALIFORNIA LAGER, SAN FRANCISCO ★★★

Golden, crisp and bracing with a malty aroma and snappy, precise flavors. (\$1.60, 12 oz.)

BROOKLYN LAGER, UTICA, N.Y. ★★★

Amber, with a pronounced malt character, balanced by juicy herbal flavors. (\$1.50, 12 oz.)

ATLAS BREW WORKS DISTRICT COMMON, WASHINGTON, D.C. ★★★

Amber, hoppy aroma but not overbearing; pleasantly bitter and deliciously refreshing. (\$1.70, 12 oz.)

NINKASI BREWING VENN DORTMUND-STYLE LAGER, EUGENE, ORE. ★★1/2

Golden, aromas of malt and hops, balanced and refreshingly bitter. (\$2, 12 oz.)

GREAT LAKES BREWING DORTMUNDER GOLD LAGER, CLEVELAND ★★1/2

Pale amber, lightly bitter, with lively flavors of malt and hops. (\$1.70, 12 oz.)

CALDERA BREWING LAWNMOWER LAGER, ASHLAND, ORE. ★★1/2

Golden with grassy aromas, fresh, subtle and pleasantly bitter. (\$1.90, 12 oz.)

SAMUEL ADAMS BOSTON LAGER, BOSTON/CINCINNATI ★★1/2

Pale amber, crisp and bitter, with a refreshing, briny quality. (\$1.60, 12 oz.)

RIVER HORSE LAGER, EWING, N.J. ★★

Amber, unfiltered, crisp and straightforward. (\$2, 12 oz.)

NARRAGANSETT LAGER, ROCHESTER, N.Y. ★★

Golden, clean and light-bodied, with a slightly fruity, bitter flavor. (\$1.30, 12 oz.)