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D48 | SATURDAY/SUNDAY • OCTOBER 1-2, 2011 | THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

COOKING & EATING

HALF FULL

BEST OF THE FEST

Grab your stein and fill it high with a hearty Oktoberfest brew

BY WILLIAM BOSTWICK

literally means "measure," but, per Teutonic priorities, is now shorthand for a liter of beer.

In America, bolder ales and subtler (or simply lighter) pilsners get more attention, but not deservedly so. Stateside Märzens often shine. Samuel Adams, brewer, patriot, publicist, skilled for "our own October Beer" the way today's politicians tout domestic oil. Drink local, he said, "so that we may no longer be beholden to foreigners for a credible liquor."

Two centuries later, some American Märzens still fight to prove their worth. Many brewers simply ratchet up the hops with citrusy, local varieties, tugging the style too far from its balanced, softly spicy German roots. But cleverer takes, like those gathered below, play with malt and yeast, toying with the beer's warm, fruit-basket flavors, adding a cherry note here, turning down the blackberry there.

Above all, local means fresh, and that beats a more authentic German beer that has turned cardboard-y due to the temperature swings it had to endure while crossing the Atlantic. When stocking your biergarten, always check the expiration date. (Yes, beers have them.) This Oktoberfest, stale beer can be avoided; old pretzels, however, are inevitable.

IN THIS HOLIDAY of abundance, of overflowing steins and bars and dirndls, let's pause to consider the fuel of this debauched blaze: the beer. The time is Oktoberfest and the style is Märzen. Named for the month in which it's brewed (March), this caramel lager spends its summer fermenting cool and slow—before refrigeration, the beer was stored in Bavarian caves—emerging dark, rich and autumnally mature in color and taste in the fall.

While the festival itself is not exactly known as a study in balance, the beer surely is. Not too sweet, not too spicy, not too strong, Märzen is easy to like and to drink, and that accessibility helps explain the thirsty crowds that wash over Munich in the last two weeks of September. Oktoberfest, which comes to its dizzy end on Monday, began as an 1810 wedding party for Prince Ludwig, and has included horse races, dances, agricultural fairs and the occasional cholera epidemic. (Now you know why steins have lids.) Although, to be technical, the foaming mugs are known in Germany by their Bavarian name, Maß, pronounced "mahss." It



From Top: Corbis, F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal (5)



Magic Hat Hex
5.4% ABV

A curiously herbal beer from this Vermont brewery, with Magic Hat's trademark fruity nose (some fans of their #9 pale ale call it apricot), enlarged by sharp, earthy cuts of cherrywood-smoked malt.



Brooklyn Oktoberfest
5.5% ABV

Rich with dark fruit and crusty grains—think a warm plum cobbler—the nose brakes hard into a crisp, orange-peel bitterness and a wisp or two of lingering licorice bite. A bold, decadent beer from a brewery that knows its lagers.



Spaten Oktoberfest
5.9% ABV

Here's one to feel, as much as taste. Slosh it around: Airy, fresh-baked bread thickens to lip-smacking caramel on the tongue then vaporizes with a crisp, sizzling pop. Age muddles this Munich-brewed beer's finish, so find it fresh.



Narragansett Fest
5.5% ABV

Sweeter and slightly spiced, this is liquid autumn: crisp fall leaves, raisins and currants, a bit of clove and the creamy, sourish glow of roasted squash. The can, while not as festive as stone-ware, is easier on the biceps.



Hacker-Pschorr Oktoberfest
5.8% ABV

An astounding blend of rich, sweet fruit and sharp, spicy bite. It's like puréed dates and apple cider. Zesty and hearty at the same time, Hacker-Pschorr's is the classic Oktoberfest, defining the styl fugitive balance.

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