



Our picks of the best of the brewer's art

BY LAUREN BUZZEO

PHOTO JON VAN GORDER

This year, in the June issue, *Wine Enthusiast* was proud to introduce its Beer Buying Guide—equal parts acknowledgement of the craft brewer's movement and a means to satisfy strong hints on the part of readers and staff. As a result, our Best of Year issue also welcomes a new member to our Top Wines and Spirits lists, the Top 25 Beers of 2009.

The beers listed here represent the most diverse and dynamic offerings that were tasted this year. They are beers that offer extraordinary quality at prices that still represent affordable luxury.

In compiling this list, I had to go beyond simple evaluation of numeric scores and pricing and also consider availability, buzz and balance. With so many selections currently available to the American beer consumer, it was important to showcase a wide range of styles produced in various countries and regions at all price points. From classic styles like American lagers and wheat beers to newer, more experimental styles such as American wild ales, this list demonstrates both the beauty and craftsmanship of a traditionally brewed beer as well as the excitement and cutting-edge adventure of the craft brewing scene today.

So hoist your steins and turn the page to discover the best that this year's reviews had to offer.

PHOTO

1

95 Captain Lawrence Rosso e Marrone (American Wild Ale; Captain Lawrence Brewing Co, NY); 10.0% abv; \$12/375 ml. An amber-brown colored brew, aged in French and American oak wine barrels for over two years with brettanomyces, and Merlot and Zinfandel grapes added. Prominent aromas of horse blanket, wet hay and earth backed by notes of rhubarb, vinegar, sour cherry, wine-soaked oak and tart red grapes. The mouth is as intense as the nose but with more of the oak notes along with leather, grapefruit and barely ripe stone fruit. With high effervescence and bracing acidity, everything is perfectly balanced and integrated. Finishes dry with a hint of lingering sweetness and soft tannins.

2

94 Unibroue Maudite (Belgian Dark Strong Ale; Unibroue, Canada); 8.0% abv, \$9/750 ml. Another top-notch beer from the folks at Unibroue, who are known for their masterfully crafted Belgian-style brews. Deep caramel brown in color with a good amount of off-white colored head. Forward yeasty aromas on the nose are backed by notes of cinnamon, clove and toasted brioche drizzled in buttery caramel sauce. The spice follows through to the palate and marries with notes of dried black fruits, brown sugar and toasted wood. Lots of personality, depth of flavors and beautiful integration, with a roasty but remarkably clean finish.

3

93 Orchard White (Witbier; The Bruery, CA); 5.7% abv, \$8/750 ml. Pours a hazy lemon color with a good 3–4 fingers worth of cloudy, frothy head. Intense nose of floral and spice elements: wild flowers, grapeseed oil, lavender and coriander. Flavors of citrus and honeydew are followed by notes of cardamom, lemon zest, lavender and lilac. Integrated and balanced with hints of cinnamon and light nuttiness on the finish. A complex and delicious beer, but the potent florals make it a love-it or hate-it style.

4

93 Avery The Maharaja (American Double/ Imperial IPA; Avery Brewing, CO); 10.27% abv, \$7/22 oz. Golden amber in color with superb lacing. Intense nose of citrus oil and roasted green apple with accents of nectarine pit and sweet pine. Lush and creamy in the mouth, loaded with hoppy flavors of citrus rind and lime oil backed by toasted malt sweetness. Alcohol is in balance, and all of the components perfectly integrated thanks to the unexpected caramelized malt presence that subsides the sometimes overly bitter hop character of a DIPA. Ending with a long, lingering finish, this is an intense, robust, and masterfully crafted full-flavored beer that doesn't go over the top. Try with sweet-smoked or hickory-barbecue chicken.

5

94 Southern Tier Imperial Pumping (Pumpkin Ale; Southern Tier Brewing Co., NY); 9.0% abv, \$9/22 oz. The bottle reads, "Bewitched and brewed with pagan spirit", and man do I believe it! This is a true pumpkin beer, for any lover of the style. Golden orange in color with amber highlights throughout and a creamy head. The bouquet is beautiful and immediately inviting: sweet spice, sweet citrus resin oils, brown sugar. Full and robust in the mouth with nice baked pumpkin flavors, allspice, vanilla, hop spice and oil. The finish is long and delicious, and with the weight and complexity the higher abv is barely noticeable. Wow.

6

94 Trappistes Rochefort 8 (Belgian Dark Strong Ale; Brasserie de Rochefort, Belgium); 9.2% abv, \$6/330 ml. Almost opaque dark brown in color with a substantial tan colored head. Cinnamon, dark dried fruits, caramel squares and malty sweetness dance around the moderately intense nose. The mouth is big and very concentrated with medium-high carbonation and flavors of granulated brown sugar, molasses, baked apples and caramelized figs. Very filling with a lot of complexity; the more it warms, the more depth of flavors it shows. A beautiful example of the style: fantastically balanced, decadent and sure to age gracefully.

7

93 Eliot Ness Lager (Vienna Lager; Great Lakes Brewing Co., OH); 6.2% abv, \$9/6 pack. What a wonderful lager. Vibrant amber color with concentrated aromas of toasted biscuit, wood-grilled red apple, honey and sweet spice. The mouth is lush and round and quite complex for a Vienna style lager with soft hop floral characteristics supported by a strong caramel malt backbone. Palate leads into a warm, dry, lingering finish. Clean and balanced with all components excellently integrated.

8

93 The Lost Abbey Cuvee de Tomme (Belgian Dark Strong Ale; The Lost Abbey, CA); 11.0% abv, \$30/750 ml. This is a strong ale for sure, both in alcohol and flavor profile. Dark brown in color with loads of vanilla, raisin, toast and oak on the nose lifted by a subtle bretty sour funk. A ton of things going on in the mouth: flavors of bourbon, sour cherry, coffee cream, walnut and more all balanced by appropriate acidity to counter the weight and heft of the flavor profile. An infinite finish with minimal carbonation and high abv makes this an excellent sipper to be shared among good friends or stored in the cellar for years to come.

I have a total irreverence for anything connected with society except that which makes the roads safer, the beer stronger, the food cheaper, and the old men and women warmer in the winter and happier in the summer.

—Brendan Behan

9

92 Nøgne-Ø-Jolly Pumpkin-Stone Special Holiday Ale (Winter Warmer; Nøgne-Ø, Norway); 8.5% abv, \$10/500 ml. This beer uses the same recipe as the Stone Special Holiday Ale, but the end result is a bit roastier, denser and fuller than the Stone bottling due to variations in production techniques and aging. Fresh dough with sweet spice, wintergreen, juniper, licorice and savory herbs abound on the nose. The rye malt is more apparent here than in the Stone bottling, and the mouth is full and creamy with loads of roasted cocoa nibs, cigar box and nutty notes. The long finish is rich with mocha flavor followed by a wonderfully juxtaposed savory caraway seed note.

10

93 Russian River Beatification (American Wild Ale; Russian River Brewing Co, CA); 5.75% abv, \$23/750 ml. Batch 003. This is for the true sour beer fan. It's light lemon in color and pours with a thick head. Sour citrus dominates the nose with hints of lemon-grass, basil, white cranberry and Granny Smith apple. The mouth is light in body but intense in flavor, loaded with lemon drop, horse blanket, tart gooseberry, hay and a kiss of toast. The carbonation is delicate and refined, a result of the secondary fermentation in bottle. Pair with rich dishes that need a zesty complement, like fried soft-shell crabs.

11

92 La Moneuse Saison (Saison/Farmhouse Ale; Brasserie de Blaugies, Belgium); 8% abv; \$13/750 ml. Cloudy orange honey color with a cream-colored frothy head. Spicy hop aromas with suggestions of orange, yeast, pine and apple precede the heavily carbonated mouth, which is loaded with flavors of hay, green apple, pepper, cardamom and toast followed by balanced warmth. The finish is dry but malty, with dried-grass notes leading into an appropriately tannic, resinous hop-oil finish. The citrusy notes appeal to summer, while the velvety texture and caramelized malt notes play to fall.

12

93 The Lost Abbey Duck-Duck-Gooze Ale (American Wild Ale; The Lost Abbey, CA); 7.0% abv; \$30/750 ml. Duck-Duck-Gooze is a play on Gueuze, a traditional Belgian lambic style. The hazy yellow-colored beer pours wild but subsides fast. Lemon supremes, grapefruit pith, tart white grape and barnyard notes abound, along with a hint of honeyed petrol. The carbonation is high but smooth, balancing out the medium-weight mouth full of citrus, Sweet Tarts and wet hay with nuances of white pepper. Dry and refreshing, a rather approachable sour ale.

13

92 St. Bernardus Wit (Witbier; Brouwerij St. Bernardus; Belgium); 5.5% abv, \$12/4 pack. A hazy, light brown color in the glass. Cloudy, strong head with good retention. Hints of apple, wood-grilled peaches, oatmeal, ginger and other sweet spices. Medium bodied and crisp in the mouth, with green apple backed by banana, pink grapefruit, nectarine pit, yeasty dough and accents of coriander and woody spice. Well balanced, integrated and delicious.

14

92 Deschutes Jubelale (Winter Warmer; Deschutes Brewery, OR); 6.7% abv, \$9/6 pack. Pours a beautiful garnet brown color with a tan head and decent lacing. Roasty aromas of caramel and soft sweet spice harmonize with earthy notes of fresh, leafy hops. The mouth is moderately carbonated with solid chocolate malt flavors, roasted coffee beans, dried figs and hop resins that follow through right to the finish. Excellent drinkability; a great winter warmer that's not overly spiced.

15

92 Stone Vertical Epic 09.09.09 (Belgian Dark Strong Ale; Stone Brewing Co., CO); 8.9% abv, \$7/22 oz. A dark, almost black color with a medium coffee-colored head and aromas of cocoa, weak coffee, vanilla, star anise, cream soda and soft hints of bubblegum sweetness. The mouth is lightweight but incredibly intense and robust with loads of nutty malts, roasted cocoa nibs, root beer and cardamom along with a good amount of hop bitterness. The very long finish is pure burnt espresso, citrus rind and extremely dark bittersweet chocolate; hedonistic and indulgent with fantastic aging potential.

16

91 Allagash White (Witbier; Allagash Brewing Company, ME); 5.2% abv, \$9/6 pack. Cloudy lemon color; nice white head with strong, staying lacing. Nose is moderately intense with aromas of coriander, bitter orange peel, banana and malted wheat. Medium full mouth with grassy flavors backed by tangerine essence, raw biscuit, cardamom and hints of white pepper. Subtle hop flavors in the back of the mouth; the finish shows candied hints.

17

91 Bam Bière Farmhouse Ale (Saison/Farmhouse Ale; Jolly Pumpkin Artisan Ales, MI); 4.5% abv; \$10/750 ml. This is a refreshing saison, showing a cloudy golden color and a frothy off-white head. Tiny flecks of yeasty goodness are suspended in the glass thanks to the brew being bottle conditioned. The nose is gorgeous: notes of citrus rind, dried stone fruit (think apricot and mango), coriander and a prominent aroma of stable. The mouth has vibrant acidity and carbonation, leading into flavors of pepper, lime, grass-filled earthiness and tart green plum.

Then let the goblet gleam for
Me, my friend
Pour forth care-soothing wine
ere pleasures end.

—PALLADAS

18

91 Samuel Adams Boston Lager (Vienna Lager; The Boston Beer Co., MA); 4.7% abv; \$9/6 pack. Pours a golden amber color with a substantial eggshell head that leaves behind decent lacing after fading. Moderate aromas of grassy, floral hop esters accented by notes of caramel malt; overall, fresh, somewhat sweet and very inviting. More resinous hop oil characteristics appear on the palate, accented by pine and roasted malt. Closes on a dry and mildly bitter hop loaded finish.

19

91 Nostradamus (Belgian Dark Strong Ale; Brasserie Caracole, Belgium); 9.0% abv, \$13/4 pack. Pours a medium dark brown color with a moderate tan head. Aromas of banana, warm caramel sauce, figs, raisins and dried sweet cherries are all lifted by a backbone of sour acidity. The mouthfeel is round and creamy with flavors of roasted cocoa nibs, dark rum soaked prunes and cinnamon graham crackers. The clean finish is full of strong malted coffee while the alcohol is warming and augments the sweet spices lingering on the back of the palate.

20

91 Sierra Nevada Summerfest (Czech Pilsener; Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., CA); 5.0% abv, \$9/6 pack. Pours a clear golden color with a thick white head that quickly dissipates. The aromas are moderate and amazingly crisp with notes of subtly spicy fresh hops. The palate echoes the nose, with clean notes of lemon essence and hop florals backed by hints of honey-dripped malt. Moderate and delicately bittered finish, this balanced and refreshing lager is a perfect brew to complement virtually any summer activity or eats, particularly chicken wings and baby back ribs.

21

91 Smuttynose Pumpkin Ale (Pumpkin Ale; Smuttynose Brewing Co, NH); 6.0% abv, \$9/6 pack. Golden apricot in color with aromas of pumpkin rind, sweet spice, and subtle clean malt. It's not overly powerful, with well-proportioned fruit and spice. The mouth is full and round with dominant pumpkin guts, cinnamon and pepper backed by a hint of hop bitters. The medium finish is full of roasted pumpkin seeds; clean and balanced with excellent drinkability.

22

90 Left Hand Oktoberfest Märzen Lager (Märzen/Oktoberfest; Left Hand Brewing Company, CO); 6.0% abv; \$9/6 pack. Burnt-apricot color. Whiffs of cinnamon, nutmeg and allspice abound, backed by caramel-drizzled baked apples, spiced roasted pumpkin and freshly baked bread. The mouth is clean and full with roasty malt character, winter warmer-esque spice, apple-pie notes and a soft hint of hop bitterness. A warm, inviting, and delicious Oktoberfest.

23

90 Dogfish Head Festina Pêche (Berliner Weissbier; Dogfish Head Craft Brewery Inc., DE); 4.5% abv, \$9/4 pack. An unbelievably refreshing Berliner Weisse-style beer fermented with fresh peaches, this tart expression is somewhat difficult to come by with only a handful of producers still making the style. Beautiful aromas and flavors of fresh peaches, sour Granny Smith and hints of resinous oil promise pure refreshment. The vibrant acidity and effervescence only further compliment the palate, resulting in a wonderfully crisp and enlightening drinking experience.

24

90 Nuova Mattina (Saison/Farmhouse Ale; Birrifico Del Ducato, Italy); 5.8% abv; \$25/750 ml. Pours with a frothy head that looks like whipped marshmallow. Floral nose with aromas of chamomile, lavender soap and sour fruits. A hint of wildness marks the nose, and follows through on the palate, along with flavors of ginger, sweet spice, pepper and rose petals. The medium body is backed by mildly assertive carbonation, and finishes with a dry, citrusy bitterness.

25

90 Victory Festbier (Märzen/Oktoberfest; Victory Brewing Company, PA); 5.6% abv; \$9/6 pack. A golden russet color with a frothy toffee colored head. The nose offers aromas of cream, sweet bread, lime pith and roasted nuts. The mouth is medium-weight and malty, with subtle coffee notes, floral hops, and notes of cinnamon. A balanced brew with a long, lingering finish that veers towards hoppy bitterness. **WE**

A daydream is a meal at which images are eaten. Some of us are gourmets, some gourmands, and a good many take their images precooked out of a can and swallow them down whole, absent-mindedly and with little relish.

— W.H. Auden