

TOP 25 BEERS OF 2019



Celebrating the best brews reviewed this year.

BY LAUREN BUZZEO

To all those naysayers who have insisted for the past decade-plus that craft beer was just having a moment, I think it's safe to say that the "moment" is here to stay. Indeed, what we have is an enduring movement.

The breadth of offerings has certainly expanded since the scene took hold in the early aughts, and quality beer is an established staple in any true beverage-lover's arsenal.

Cross-drinking is also the new normal, as people have awakened to the joys of high-quality pours across category types. There's far too much beauty to behold in the drinks world to remain exclusive to just one libation.

And so, in the quest to find the best of the best across all major categories, here we are once more, ready and willing to help you sort it all

out with our end-of-year top lists covering wines, spirits, and, yes, beer.

As has been the case since our first list in 2009, it's important for us to stress that this is not a top 25 beers of all time, or even a ranking of the best brews released this past year. Rather, this list represents the most impressive, interesting and exciting beers we had the pleasure to review throughout 2019.

And as always, balance is key in both my ratings and in compiling this list. While score and price play important roles in these rankings, so do diversity of brands, styles, countries, production sizes and availability. Because, as we all know, with such a wide world of delicious beers to try, why limit yourself?

So cheers to all the cross-drinkers out there, and here's to better beer for all.

1

95 Jack's Abby Bourbon Barrel-Aged Framing-hammer (Baltic Porter; Jack's Abby Craft Lagers, MA). This is an outstanding barrel-aged porter, with everything playing well together and in perfect harmony. It's big and bold right from the start, but pleasingly so, with robust, decadent aromas and flavors of roasted malt, dark chocolate and vanilla bean all hit by a warm overlay of baking spice and sweet oak. The palate is silky smooth, with a round, creamy texture that's complemented by mild yet ample carbonation and a hint of bittersweet cocoa. The finish is long and warming, with lingering tones of burnt brown sugar, sweet spice and molasses-soaked oak. Enjoy this now and over the next few years.

abv: 12%

Price: \$10/500 ml

2

97 Westmalle Trappist Ale Tripel (Tripel; Trappist Monastery of Westmalle, Belgium). Brewed by one of the world's 13 Trappist breweries, it doesn't get more true-to-style than this classic Belgian brew. It pours a gorgeous golden color, with a frothy off-white head, like a glass of sunshine topped by a fluffy cloud. The nose is earthy, spicy and fruity, all in perfect harmony, with notes of baked apricot, banana bread, candied lemon peel, clove, browned sugar and peppery, yeasty spice. Despite the rich-smelling bouquet, the mouthfilling palate is dry and well-balanced by ample carbonation, dried tropical-fruit flavors and a touch of citrusy vibrancy. The lightly warming finish offers an abundance of baking and peppery spice tones that linger endlessly. Merchant du Vin.

abv: 9.5%

Price: \$7/11.2 oz

3

96 Beachwood Blendery Funk Yeah (Belgian-style Gueuze; Beachwood Blendery, CA). A golden beauty, this blend of one-, two- and three-year-old Belgian-style lambics is an homage to traditional Belgian gueuze bottlings. Fermented and aged in oak barrels, it's a complex and layered selection, with an earthy, woody overlay to the ubertart and mouthwatering stone-fruit, white-grape and citrus characteristics. The palate is full of acidic energy and vinous in feel, yet also simultaneously concentrated in wild grains, barnyard straw and fresh-cracked wheat before resolving on the finish to a bright lemon-zest twang. It's superbly balanced, with a long, evolving finish. While it's easy to enjoy now, this should age wonderfully over the medium-term.

abv: 6.4%

Price: \$20/500 ml

4

96 Rodenbach Vintage 2016 Flanders Red Ale (Flanders Red Ale; Rodenbach, Belgium). This beer comes from a single vintage and a single barrel, in this case, *foeder* number 222. An unblended two-year-aged ale, this release never disappoints. A ruby-mahogany color, it pours with a small tan head and opens with assertive aromas of tart red fruits, barnyard and balsamic. Hints of yeasty spice, vanilla bean and lightly toasted oak dance in the background. The palate is crisp and acidic, yet simultaneously medium in body and decadent in feel. It showcases a beautiful balance between the mouthwatering red currant, tart raspberry and red cherry fruits and the woody, earthy and vinous aspects of dry forest scrub, barn floor and leathery spice that undulate on the evolving finish. Latis Imports.

abv: 7%

Price: \$20

5



96 The Bruery Chocolate Reign (American Double/Imperial Stout; The Bruery, CA). Like many stouts from The Bruery, this is not for the faint of heart. A double barrel-aged version of the brewery's Chocolate Rain, this imperial stout brewed with cacao nibs and vanilla beans is rich, creamy and decadent in every way possible. Aromas of bitter-sweet cocoa, coffee bean, char and a touch of warm, Bourbon-soaked berries immediately waft from the glass. Those notes all carry through to the intense, slick and mouthfilling palate, with light wood tannins to aid in framing all the decadence. The finish is eternally long, dry and evolving, with warm toasted-spice and roasted cocoa-nib tones that transition into comforting accents of earthy forest and tree bark.

abv: 21%

Price: \$50/750 ml

6

92 Sierra Nevada Kellerweiss (German-style Hefeweizen; Sierra Nevada Brewing Company, CA). This is a classic pour, with a super-hazy golden-orange appearance and a big white head that sticks around. It leads with an assertive scent of clove-studded banana that's backed by additional hints of biscuit dough, lemon peel and a touch of white pepper. The palate offers more of the same, though expressed in a superbly pleasant yet surprisingly not overly sweet or heavy banana-bread flavor, with ample carbonation and a lingering yeasty spice tone that keep it all balanced and lifted.

abv: 4.8%

Price: \$11/12 oz 6 pack

7

92 Sketchbook Night Game Double IPA Brewed With Honey (American Double/Imperial IPA; Sketchbook Brewing Company, IL). Brewed with Mosaic hops and honey, this is a well-balanced yet dank brew. A rich amber color, it opens with intense hop tones of citrus oil, pineapple rind, grapefruit peel and just a touch of pine resin. Those notes carry through to the medium-bodied mouthfeel, which is smooth in texture and generous in rich citrus flavors. A core of malty richness and a kiss on honeyed orange peel on the close are consistent with the overall impression, though the finish closes thoroughly dry and appropriately bitter.

abv: 8.8%

Price: \$13/16 oz 4 pack

8

94 Ballast Point Victory at Sea Imperial Porter with Coffee & Vanilla (American Imperial Porter; Ballast Point Brewing Company, CA). This porter is not one to miss, and thanks to its year-round availability, you don't have to. Infused with vanilla and coffee beans from San Diego's Caffè Calabria, it's a rich and roasty brew, packed with robust and decadent notes from start to finish. A dark, near-black color with a frothy chocolate head, the nose leads with potent aromas of fresh vanilla, sweet coffee and Baker's chocolate. Those notes all carry through to the bold palate, which is plush and full in feel. Ample, fine carbonation keeps the weight and sweet impressions in check, while the lightly bitter finish lends a pleasant, lasting textural impression.

abv: 10%

Price: \$16/12 oz 6 pack

9

94 Founders Blushing Monk Belgian Style Ale (Fruit Beer; Founders Brewing Co., MI). This limited-edition Belgian-style ale is fermented with pure raspberries, and it dominates the experience in the best of ways from first sniff to last sip. Aside from an assertive fruit core of fresh mashed raspberries, it offers attractive notes of bready malt, white pepper and yeasty spice to complement. The medium-bodied palate is slightly creamy and slick in feel, with low carbonation but a bright, fruity tartness that helps to balance the generous texture. Despite the high abv, the alcohol is remarkably well-integrated and balanced, and the finish entrances with lingering tones of earthy spice.

abv: 9.2%

Price: \$18/12 oz 6 pack

10



95 Side Project Brewing Blanc de Blancs Blend #2 (Bière de Champagne; Side Project Brewing, MO). Fermented in wine barrels with California Chardonnay grapes and aged in oak for more than 18 months, this is an intricate, nuanced pour that should appeal to wine- and beer-lovers alike. Aromas of white grape, green apple, lemon peel and pineapple rind immediately waft from the glass, while hints of fresh wheat, yeasty spice and barnyard appear upon deeper nosing. The palate is bright and lively in feel, despite the alcohol, thanks to tart citrus and stone-fruit flavors framed by aggressive acidity. Subtle hints of lemon pepper and earthy funk linger on the close.

abv: 10%

Price: \$20/375 ml

11

94 Springdale Friends in Merlot Places (American Wild Ale; Springdale by Jack's Abby Brewing, MA). From Springdale, the sister brewery for ale and wild-fermentation experimentation to the lager-centric Jack's Abby Brewing, this oak-aged sour was brewed with California Merlot juice then aged eight to 12 months in red-wine barrels made from French and American oak. The result is a harmonious, vibrant and grapy pour, with assertive vinous aromas of tart raspberry, cherry and balsamic that are partnered with seductive hints of cocoa powder, caramel and raw sweet dough. The palate is light and effervescent, with a tart mouthwatering pucker that leads the finish but is followed abruptly by whispers of sweet oaky spice, cocoa nib and leather.

abv: 9.5%

Price: \$13/500 ml

12

93 Samuel Smith's Nut Brown Ale (English Brown Ale; Samuel Smith Old Brewery [Tadcaster], England). This iconic brown ale, from the family-owned Samuel Smith brewery, was introduced in cans in 2018, making it all the more easy to find and enjoy while out and about. It pours a rich mahogany brown color, with a solid beige head that shows good retention. The bouquet opens with enticing aromas of toasted malts, brown bread, caramelized brown sugar and warm hazelnuts. The medium-weight body is full and creamy in feel, with pleasant toasted nut and caramel malt flavors. A lightly bitter walnut flavor unfolds on the finish and lends a slight textural grip and dry sensation to the close, lifting the rich flavor profile and finishing clean. Merchant du Vin.

abv: 5%

Price: \$12/14.9 oz 4 pack

13

93 Stone Farking Wheaton W00tstout 2019 Release (American Double/Imperial Stout; Stone Brewing, CA). This year's stout is brewed with pecans, wheat and rye, with one quarter aged in Bourbon barrels, and features original label artwork from comic artist Alan Davis. It pours a rich black color with a solid light-brown head. Nutty, chocolaty and spicy notes immediate emanate from the glass, with a slightly boozy, Bourbon-like accent underscoring it all. The palate is strong, full and warm, but not overly so, with pleasant roasted grains, browned caramel sauce, bittersweet cocoa and toasted pecan flavors that are enlivened by just enough carbonation to keep it from feeling too thick or cloying. The finish is bitter and dry, with lingering dark chocolate and char tones.

abv: 11.5%

Price: \$17/12 oz 6 pack

14

92 Maine Beer Company Peeper (American Pale Ale; Maine Beer Company, ME). Anyone who asserts that pale ales are plain or boring needs to pick up this bottle from Maine Beer Company. The brewery's original release recipe, Peeper is a classic, well-balanced and layered pale ale brewed with Amarillo, Cascade and Centennial hops. A bright golden-yellow color in the glass, with a slight haze and a pillowy white head that shows excellent retention, the bouquet leads with enticing aromas of grapefruit peel, fresh-cut grass and lemon basil. The medium-weight palate offers more notes of pithy grapefruit, lemon and strawberry hull at first, but then veers into a grainy sweetness that fleshes out the feel and lends some support to the final dry, bitter impression.

abv: 5.5%

Price: \$10/500 ml

15



92 Area Two Brett Noir (American Wild Ale; Two Roads Brewing Co., CT). From Brewmaster Phil Markowski and the new Two Roads outpost, Area Two, this tasty exercise bridges the wine and beer worlds. An ale fermented with Pinot Noir grapes and *Brettanomyces bruxellensis* yeast, then aged for nine months in French and American oak sourced from two Napa Valley vintners, it has a pronounced vinous character, with notes of tart cherry, balsamic herbs, pink apple, lemon pith and dry, oaky spice. It's tangy and refreshing, with a cleansing pucker followed by an evolving finish that offers notes of leather, dried orange blossom and cocoa-dusted cherry skin.

abv: 6.5%

Price: \$12/375 ml

16

93 Ayinger Bräuweisse (Hefeweizen; Brauerei Aying, Germany). This classic, harmonious hefe is a beautiful pour, with a cloudy golden color and a fluffy white head that lingers. The bouquet opens with scents of fresh wheat, bread dough, clove-spiked banana and lemon rind. The palate is smooth and satisfying, medium in weight and just plush enough to give a rich impression without overly ripe or sweet flavors. Moderate carbonation keeps the experience refreshing and clean through the spicy finish. Merchant du Vin.

abv: 5.1%

Price: \$4/330 ml

17

92 Crane Brewing Grapefruit Gose (Gose; Crane Brewing Co., MO). This gose-style sour ale packs a seriously mouth-puckering punch, but in a delightful, harmoniously balanced way. Brewed with salt and grapefruit zest, it opens with bright scents of salted grapefruit and lemon peel that are partnered with hints of raw sourdough and hay bale. The light-weight palate is super refreshing and mouthwatering, with vibrant acidity, lively carbonation and additional hints of pineapple core, crab apple, pressed yellow flowers and cracker malt to complement the tart grapefruit-pith core. It finishes dry and tart, with glimmers of white grape, coriander and salted grapefruit peel.

abv: 4.1%

Price: \$6/375 ml

18

91 Deschutes Fresh Haze India Pale Ale (Juicy/Hazy IPA; Deschutes Brewery, OR). This canned brew pours a hazy sunset-orange color in the glass, with a frothy white head that shows good retention. The nose is powerful in expected waves of juicy Mandarin orange and pineapple, with touches of fresh, grassy hops and lightly honeyed malts. The palate is smooth and satisfying in ripe citrus flavors that transition to a lightly bitter citrus-peel note that lends some textural lift through the finish, while the bready malt core provides a supporting backbone to all of the juicy, hoppy goodness throughout.

abv: 6.5%

Price: \$11/12 oz 6 pack

19

91 Cigar City Maduro Brown Ale (English-style Brown Ale; Cigar City Brewing, FL). This pours a solid dark-brown color, with a small tan head that falls rather fast. The nose is pleasantly roasty upfront, with rich scents of caramel malt, milk chocolate, toffee and espresso that all complement the roasted peanut core. The medium-weight palate offers more of the same, with a woody accent that gains traction through the earthy close. The crisp carbonation keeps the palate lively, balancing the toasty, slightly decadent flavors and resulting in a clean finish that leaves you ready for more. With only moderate alcohol, it's a satisfying and richly flavored pour that won't leave you on the floor after a few samples.

abv: 5.5%

Price: \$11/12 oz 6 pack

20

91 Coronado Brewing Co. Weekend Vibes IPA (American IPA; Coronado Brewing Co., CO). Brewed with Mosaic, Citra and Simcoe hops, this is a classic Cali-style IPA. It abounds with enticing hop notes of citrus oil, resin and pineapple rind, all supported by ample bready malts and a caramel kiss on the palate. It's full and bold in weight and flavor, yet well balanced by moderate carbonation. A sticky sensation unfolds on the enduring close, which only amplifies those resinous, pine-like hop characteristics you know and love.

abv: 6.8%

Price: \$13/16 oz 6 pack

21

90 Dogfish Head SuperEight Super Gose (Gose; Dogfish Head Craft Brewery, DE). A collaboration with Kodak, this gose is brewed with eight "heroic" ingredients beyond the sea salt traditional for the style: prickly pear, mango, boysenberry, blackberry, raspberry, elderberry, kiwi juice and toasted quinoa. A vibrant red color, it's a fruitspllosion from first whiff to last sip, with abundant tart berry and tropical fruit tones that are partnered with a salty lick and zippy lemon zest. It's just shy of medium bodied and easy to enjoy, with a bright overall character that's mouthwatering and high in refreshment.

abv: 5.3%

Price: \$13/12 oz 6 pack

22

90 Unibroue Éphémère Strawberry and Rhubarb (Fruit Beer; Unibroue, Canada). Unibroue's Éphémère series of fruited beers are always clean and attractive, and this newest addition to the lineup doesn't disappoint. A light onion-skin color in the glass, scents of stewed strawberries and rhubarb leap from the glass, with additional notes of more bright red berries, cherry and orange rind. The palate is just medium in weight, with bright carbonation and tart fruit flavors that provide great overall balance and refreshment. The finish shows a bit more texture and earthy characteristics, as opposed to juicy fruit, which is showcased in lingering waves of strawberry hull, tops and yeasty spice. Unibrew USA.

abv: 5.5%

Price: \$13/12 oz 6 pack

23

91 Breakside What Rough Beast New England-Style India Pale Ale (Juicy/Hazy IPA; Breakside Brewery, OR). While this might not be the haziest of the hazies, it shows excellent overall balance and great drinkability. A lightly hazy deep-gold color, it opens with assertive aromas of tropical fruit, honeydew, citrus peels and a touch of fresh pine needle, with supporting grainy notes of biscuit dough and caramel malt. The medium-bodied, soft mouthfeel offers more malt weight than straightforward juiciness, with flavors of melon rind, orange and grapefruit pith that carry on through to the close.

abv: 6.8%

Price: \$8/22 oz

24

90 Hopewell Brewing Co. Side Salad (European-style Saison; The Hopewell Brewing Co., IL). Labeled as a grisette, or a saison-like beer, this is a mixed-culture brew that was blended from young and aged wild ale to pleasant, well-balanced effect. It's light in alcohol and bright and tart in character, with notes of green apple, lemon peel and barnyard bale throughout. Lightweight and refreshing, it boasts high, brisk carbonation and a straw-like core that carries through to the dry, lightly astringent finish.

abv: 4.7%

Price: \$12/12 oz 4 pack

25

90 Chapman Crafted Pils (American Pilsner; Chapman Crafted Beer, CA). This is a classically styled Pils, with a clear, straw-colored appearance and a soft white head. The aromas are clean and straightforward, with light notes of cracker malt and freshly dried hay. The palate is light and brisk, with lively carbonation and more flavors of fresh hay and cracker and biscuit malt. It's well-balanced, refreshing and easy to like, finishing dry and crisp.

abv: 5.2%

Price: \$14/16 oz 4 pack