

DRAFT'S TOP 25 BEERS of the YEAR

WE TASTED MORE THAN A THOUSAND BEERS THIS YEAR—SOME FRESH FROM THE TANK, OTHERS FROM CENTURIES-OLD RECIPES—AND CROWNED THE TOP 25 THAT BLEW US AWAY IN 2009, EITHER FOR THE FIRST TIME OR THE HUNDRETH. SOME ARE MULTI-MEDAL AWARD WINNERS, OTHERS HAVE CAPTURED THE IMAGINATION OF BLOGGERS AND BEER GEEKS AND STILL OTHERS HAVE SAT QUIETLY, AWAITING THEIR MOMENT OF GLORY. HERE IT IS.

2009

UNION JACK
Firestone Walker Brewing Co.
American IPA
 This beer remains king of its kind with back-to-back GABF gold medals in 2008 and 2009. There's some stiff competition in the American IPA category, the largest ever with 134 entries this year, but this brew continually proves to be truly exceptional, oozing an inspiring piney, citrusy and floral hop profile.

ESTATE
Sierra Nevada Brewing Co.
Wet-Hopped Ale
 Sierra Nevada made beer history this year when it crafted a large-scale production brew using barley and hops grown right on the brewery's premise. Sure, it's a provocative story, but the beer simply blew us away: Estate's a swallow to behold with snappy hop character, lasting bitterness and a light, fruity finish.

CUVEE DE CASTLETON
Captain Lawrence Brewing Co.
American Sour Ale
 This Pleasantville, N.Y. brewery has turned heads the last few years with its lineup of intriguing sour beers; today, its Cuvée de Castleton is one of the finest on the market. Light, bubbly and tart, the award-winning brew gets its spunk from wild yeast and Muscat grapes, and subtle oak notes from French wine barrels.

KIWANDA CREAM ALE
Pelican Pub & Brewery
Cream Ale
 One of just a few carryovers from last year's list, this beer continues to be the one every beer drinker should stock in their fridge. The multi-award-winning Kiwanda is light-bodied with gently toasted grains and an incredibly bright finish. Moderately bitter and perfectly balanced, there's not a more refreshing beer in America to day.



STONE KONA COFFEE
MACADAMIA COCONUT PORTER
Stone Brewing, Maul Brewing and homebrewer Ken Schmidt
Specialty Beer
 Take three rock star brewers, add 1,000 pounds of coconut, 300 pounds of Kona coffee, and 200 pounds of macadamia nuts, and you've got a recipe for utter awesomeness. As part of Stone's collaboration series, homebrewer Ken Schmidt, Maul Brewing's Garrett Monson and Stone's Mitch Steele tapped Schmidt's award-winning porter and brewed, filled it with fresh ingredients and alcohol spilt to craft this swoon-inducing brew. A full coffee and coconut rounded out by beautiful macadamia swaths, creating a cohesive swallow; alcohol warms the chest, just like a good cup o' joe.

DUVEL
David Muirgutt
Belgian Golden Strong
 When brewers want to craft a Belgian golden strong ale, they emulate Duvel. It scored a perfect 100 points in DRAFT'S 2009 ratings quite simply because it's everything this style should be and more. Pale gold and full-bodied, Duvel displays amazing ripe pear characters and finishes remarkably dry. Careful—it's easy to imbibe, and hides its 8.5% ABV well.

GRAND CRU
Upstream Brewing Co.
American Sour Ale
 Admittedly, Grand Cru's on the rare and obscure list, but it's well worth seeking out. Its orange-gold appearance and minimalist head belie the beer's exquisite aromas of soft fruits attached to a pungent backbone. To best appreciate all of the brew's intense characters, let it breathe for five minutes, and the high acidity will blow off. What's left is a royal treat of complex berry and citrus bursts, wild tart undertones and an incredibly dry finish.

SMOKED PORTER
Alaskan Brewing Co.
Smoked Beer
 This smoked porter had a decorated history to live up to—it's won more medals than any other beer in GABF's history—and this vintage delivered in spades. On the palate, it's smooth and slightly sweet with coffee and cocoa, covered by a thick and lovely layer of alder smoke that's bacony and a little fishy. It's an acquired taste, but one you'll never forget.

OUDE KRIEK
Hansens
Blended Lambic
 Fourth-generation, family-owned Hansens is one of the last breweries in the world dedicated to the dying art of lambic blending. Oude Kriek is its crowning creation, a beer born of unworld skill and artistry. Beneath its brilliant red hue is a pungent, acidic cherry and lingering almond notes. Fizzy and dry, it's a joy to drink.

VLAD THE IMPALER
Cascade Brewing Co.
American Sour Ale
 Cascade Brewing stole both gold and silver in this year's GABF wood- and barrel-aged sour beer category, and though Vlad was the runner-up, it's still a big winner this year. It debuted in 2009 to healthy buzz and long lines at festivals, turning heads with its full body, palate-smacking acidity and brazen woody overtones.

CONSECRATION
Russian River Brewing Co.
Barrel-Aged Sour Ale
 In the craze to make everything bigger, stronger and fuller we've nearly lost our sense of what an imperial stout should be. This beer'sinky and black, big enough to slay the biggest palate, but still drinkable beyond just sipping. Rich chocolate, coffee and caramel sweetness don't weigh heavily on the tongue, and a modest hop flavor and dry finish round this beer out perfectly.

UTOPIAS
American Strong Ale
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 Many in beer geekdom ask if this is really a beer; the real enigma is just how Utopias scales a jaw-dropping 27% ABV through natural fermentation. While it pushes the beer boundary, it's an experience worth every cent: Actually a blend of several aged beers (including a few from Scotch barrels), this year's sweetness is layered with malts and sweetness, and offers more fruit and port notes than vintage past. Boozy and uncarbonated, Utopias sips like liquor, but yes, it's still beer.

ORVAL TRAPPIST ALE
Brasserie d'Orval
Belgian Ale
 This beer, made by Trappist monks, consistently tops beer geeks' favorites lists, and for good

MIRROR MIRROR
Dochutes Brewing Co.
Barleywine
 Though it launched in 2006, this beer hibernated for three years

HEAD HUNTER IPA
Fat Head's Brewery & Saloon
American IPA
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plethora of West Coast brewers at this year's IPA Festival at the Bistro, the biggest IPA competition west of the Mississippi. After a pint of this beer, however, you'll cast all hesitations aside; it hammers over the tongue with caramelized malt and a hop display that cannot be rivaled. This isn't your fessie IPA; there isn't an ounce of subtlety to it. It's just a punch-you-in-the-mouth brew for those who truly love their hops.

HUMIDOR SERIES CHAVETA
Cigar City Brewing
Wood-Aged Beer
 This gorgeous new brew was one of 2009's tasting highlights. Aged with cedar planks, the beer's infused with so much wood and tobacco character, it tastes as if it was actually aged in a hamidor. A stretch of chocolate, fresh-mashed nut and sensuous caramel swell through the mouth, but it's the body that's truly unreal: creamy, full and silky without being heavy.

ECLIPSE IMPERIAL STOUT
Fifty Fifty Brewing Co.
Russian Imperial Stout
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BOURBON BARREL STOUT
Odell Brewing Co.
Wood-Aged Stout
 This beer is indisputable proof Odell knows how to pull nuances out of a barrel. Dark and roasty with vanilla and caramel hints, it's kissed ever so gently by the bourbon barrel's orange and woody notes. It's a big beer, certainly; it sinks deep in to the tongue, but the swallow's intricacies aren't washed away by the brew's size.

TRIPHEL
Westmalle
Belgian Tripel
 Our first-ever 100-point scoring beer, this practically perfect brew's been around for a few hundred years and is truly the hallmark of the tripel style. Pale and inviting from the pour with hints of pear and fresh-cracked pepper, this monk-made brew seems heaven-sent from start to finish. Add its light body and snappy carbonation, and you'll realize big beers don't need to be heavy-hitters; these're truly an art to subtle goodness.

CANADIAN BREAKFAST STOUT
Founders Brewing Co.
Barrel-Aged Imperial Stout
 There's little disputing the impressive quality of Founders Breakfast Stout; it's one of the finest beers made in America. Put that in barrels soaked in bourbon and oozing with fresh maple syrup, and the beer becomes simply extraordinary. This 9.5% ABV 2009 stunner wraps everything wonderful about the original stout—hints of cocoa, a coffee aroma and deep roasted malt—in a warm embrace of vanilla, maple and bourbon heat.

BALTIC PORTER
Duck Rabbit Brewery
Baltic Porter
 Lately, something new's been brewing in the South: really excellent beer. This North Carolina porter is a full-bodied phenom: It's black as night with flavors that range from fresh-roasted coffee and caramel to plums and sweet blackberry. If you're not familiar with what a Baltic porter should be, look no further than this.

WISCONSIN BELGIAN RED
New Glarus Brewing Co.
Fruit Beer
 A perennial favorite, this beer's landing on our list three years in a row. Sourcing 2 pounds of Door County Cherries per barrel and featuring Wisconsin wheat (the brewers age, bottle and sell Belgian Red only in the cheese state. It glows ruby-red and drinks like a piece of handmade candy sugary sweet and incredibly fun. The combination with the low ABV (just over 5%), made this way too easy to imbibe in good quantity. There's not a more fruitily honest-to-goodness fruit beer in America. ●

SGT. PEPPER
Cambridge Brewing Co.
Session
 Here's an easy recipe for a killer beer: Take a masterfully brewed session and add black, pink, white and green peppercorns. One of Cambridge's most peppy brews, Sgt. Pepper blends peppercorns, herbal, floral qualities with Belgian yeast. The crisp swallow starts sweet with breadly malts and a slight hop bitterness before bursting into pepper spice.

SAISON D'ERPE MERE
Saison
 In a world of palate-awakening beers, discovering a complex brew that's also easy on the tongue is rare and wonderful. This one's a favorite. Bright and refreshing, favors start biscuity before rumbling slightly tart, with floral hops that contribute a modest bite. This brew finishes impressively dry, has

BROOKLYN-SCHNEIDER
HOPFEN-WESSE
Brooklyn Brewery and Schneider Brewery
Hybrid Wheat Beer
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beautiful effervescence and boasts a modest 6.9% ABV that makes it all feel gait-free.

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