

Scottish Ale

History

Archaeological evidence shows that the Picts were making some kind of fermented beverage as far back as 6500BC. By the time the Romans invaded Britain in 43AD, the Picts were brewing their beer with barley. To flavor their beer, the Picts used heather.

As in other parts of Europe, the first commercial breweries in Scotland were monasteries dating as far back as 543 AD. During the middle ages brewing became a home industry using ginger, pepper, spices and aromatic herbs to flavor their beer. By 1488 AD the first commercial breweries were operating. By the late 1500's, Scottish strong ales were known throughout Europe. .

Characteristics

As with many beer styles, the characteristics of Scotch and Scottish beers were dictated by the country's geography. Due the cool wet climate, hops could not be grown during the short growing period in Scotland. Hops had to be imported at great expense. Thus, historically, hops were much lower than in English beer styles.

Agriculture still occupies three-quarters of the land in Scotland and barley remains a major crop. Barley produced in the north of Scotland most often becomes Scotch whiskey while that grown in the south is better suited to the making of beer. As a result of these patterns, barley has been readily accessible to Scottish brewers throughout their history.

This combination of factors led to the development of malty, somewhat sweet beers low in bitterness. The BJCP recognizes four styles of Scottish beer. Three of the styles make up the Scottish ales. They range from 1.030 – 1.050 in gravity and are broken down into Light (OG 1.030-1.035), Heavy (OG 1.035-1.040) and Export (OG 1.040-1.050). The last style is known as a Scotch ale and is much higher in gravity (OG 1.072 to 1.085). It is often called "strong Scotch ale," or by its common nick-name of "Wee Heavy".

Historically, the strength of the beer dictated how much it was taxed. The Light, Heavy and Export are known as 60/-, 70/- and 80/- shilling ales respectively. Wee Heavies are commonly called 90/- or even 120/- shilling ale. Note the “/-“ denotes shillings in Scottish currency.

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Brewing Scottish Ales

When brewing Scotch and Scottish ales, the hopping rate is low generally only a small charge of bittering hops is added to the kettle. Often, recipes do not call for the use flavor or aroma hops.

To derive the malty characteristics of the styles, a Scottish variety of pale two-row barley is used as the base. The color and flavor is historically created by the addition of small amounts of roast barley. Today, many recipes use some Vienna, Munich, or melanoidin malt to enhance the malt flavor of the brew. For the export and wee heavy ales, the use of a higher mash temperature, around 155° Fahrenheit results in a more dextrin rich wort enhancing the malt in the beer and giving more mouth feel. Flavor is also derived from caramelization in the boil kettle through the use of a long boil time. Another trick is to take a quantity of light liquid malt extract (LME) and slowly heat it to a boil in a saucepan. When the LME has reached an amber color, remove it from the heat and add it to your wort during the boil.

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Because of the cool climate, Scotch and Scottish ales require cool fermentation. Most Scottish ale yeasts are of the low attenuation variety. Once kegged or bottled, it is common to cellar the brews at a cold temperature for an extended period of time.