

## Warm inside

**Imagine a snowy scene and find comfort in winter beer**



PHOTO BY BERNT ROSTAD (VIA FLICKR)

**T**he majority of Californians don't experience snow this time of year. Thus, except for those who live among the mountain ranges that cap the northern half of the state, it takes a stretch of imagination to appreciate winter beers.

An image that marketers and beer writers often push toward consumers is that of someone sipping a strong beer—like a

barleywine, a dark Scotch ale or a spicy Belgian-style ale—beside a fire as snow accumulates outside. The worst offenders include in their write-up a ham or turkey “roasting” in the oven, a smoking pipe or a cigar, and a bear skin rug on the floor. With or without a stomach-turning cliché, I get it: Winter is cold, and “winter warmer” beers warm us up.

Since those are the kinds of beers we are supposed to be drinking now, let's talk about what makes a beer a winter beer, per se. Generally, though not always, they are malty, as opposed to dominated by hops. Malty beers have flavors and aromas of caramel, bread, molasses, grain, maple syrup and dried fruits (whereas hoppy beers bring along summery flavors of fresh fruits and flower blossoms). As well as being malty, winter beers tend to be high in alcohol. Alcohol often produces a powerful and rather instantaneous

effect of heat when consumed through a strong beer. Many winter beers are aged in spirits barrels, which creates boozy vanilla and coconut flavors. Finally, winter beers often have added ingredients that evoke the season, including ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, citrus rind, allspice, dried figs and maple syrup.

In Chico, Sierra Nevada bucks the low-hop stereotype with its flagship holiday offering, Celebration Ale, an IPA that evokes the season via the piney and citrus-zest flavors of chinook and centennial hops. More traditional winter offerings from the brewery include the big, pitch-black Narwhal imperial stout (10.2 percent alcohol-by-volume), as well as the numerous barrel-aged experiments of Sierra Nevada's Trip in the Woods series (such as the Maple Scotch, a Scotch-style ale made with maple syrup and aged in bourbon barrels).

Other Nor Cal winter-beer offerings include Hoppy Holiday, from Marin Brewing Co. Its name would suggest the beer contradicts the malty-versus-hoppy rule, but it doesn't. The beer weighs in at just 28 international bittering units—one third or so of the average IPA these days. The 7 percent ABV beer is brewed with cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, vanilla and orange peel and, frankly, who can blame

these guys for wanting to include a hop pun—always fun—on this not-so-hoppy beer's label?

In San Leandro, Drake's Brewing Co. has released a whopping barleywine called Santa's Brass. It's 13.8 percent ABV and is aged in whiskey and port barrels, and it comes as the latest in Drake's Advanced Oak barrel-aged series. Many more barleywines—Bigfoot from Sierra Nevada, Old Blarney from Moylan's—will be around for most of the winter.

Spruce tips have become a popular ingredient for winterizing a beer. For example, Drake's has released an IPA with juniper berries and spruce tips. Called the Tree Beer, its lingering effect with each sip is a spicy resin flavor with a blunt bitterness accentuating the hops. Ballast Point recently released a spruce tip rendition of its adored Sculpin IPA, for a warming, piney effect.

In the classics department, winter beers include the Anchor Brewing's Christmas Ale, Deschutes' Jubelale, 21st Amendment's Fireside Chat and Samuel Adams' Old Fezziwig.

There is also the drink-it-if-you-can-stomach-it Samichlaus, a 14 percent ABV doppelbock made in an Austrian castle. Try as I have to enjoy it, the beer still tastes too much like cough syrup to finish a wine glass of the liquor-like lager still wanting more. Perhaps if it was snowing outside. □

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