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Information Sessions are held weekly. Please call now to R.S.V.P. Sarah Lucas (530) 221-9911

CHOW

Like a warm hug

Big beers for the cold days of winter



Local temperatures dip into the 30s at night. The creeks are overflowing with rainwater. And the trees of Bidwell Park are brown and bare. Winter has beset Butte County. In such cold, hard times, our bodies work overtime, burning calories just to stay warm—and we crave strong beers.

Well, that's the traditional lore of wintertime brews, anyway, which holds that people drink bigger beers to fight the winter elements, downsizing to more summery lagers and IPAs as the weather warms. Despite a recent dusting of morning snow (that melted by lunchtime), winter's impact on the lifestyle of those in Chico—or anywhere else between here and the Bay Area—hardly compares to those states in the path of the polar vortex.

Still, Nor Cal beer drinkers like to play along with the rest of the world, and each winter, the brewers celebrate the short days and gray skies with strong beers like barleywines, super-sized Belgian styles and imperial, well, everything—stouts, porters, IPAs, reds, browns and lagers. (“Imperial,” if you haven’t figured it out, just means “high-alcohol.”)

At Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., it's clear wintertime is here as

Bigfoot—the popular barleywine (9.6 percent alcohol-by-volume)—has been sighted in six-packs in local beer coolers. And up in Redding, another creature, Fall River Brewing's appropriately named Colossus (a 13 percent ABV imperial stout), was just released into the wild.

Over in Petaluma, Lagunitas Brewing Co. releases high-alcohol beers most of the year. Still, the seasonal appearance of its Cappuccino Stout, a 9.1 percent ABV beer brewed with coffee, and its 9.6 percent ABV Undercover Investigation Shut-Down Ale, mark the winter strong-beer pattern. The brewery also releases its 11 percent ABV Olde GnarlyWine barleywine about this time each year. The beer is a personal favorite—about as rich and delicious as barleywines get.

In Santa Rosa, Russian River Brewing Co. has been serving its highly anticipated annual release Pliny the Younger—a 10-plus percent ABV triple IPA—for the first two weeks of February, while in San Francisco, Magnolia Pub and Brewery and 21st Amendment Brewery are getting directly to the point with their annual Strong Beer Month celebration, which they recognize throughout February.

This year—the 18th rendition—the two breweries are each featuring six beers containing at least

8 percent ABV. 21st Amendment's February beer list includes Triple Crisis, an 11 percent ABV triple IPA; the Red Giant, an imperial red ale tipping the scales at 13.0 ABV; Two Lane Blacktop, an imperial black IPA of 9.8 percent ABV; and three other bigguns. At Magnolia, the Haight Street brewery will be featuring Old Thunderpussy, a barleywine measuring just shy of 12 percent ABV; the Promised Land imperial IPA, which goes 11.9 percent ABV; two more beers in the 10 percent range; and a couple between 8 and 9. Strong Beer Month's website suggests drinking “responsibly” during times like these.

Whether or not strong beers are falling out of favor isn't clear. Over the past few years, session beers—those low in alcohol—have become the nexus of beer-nerd excitement.

Strong beers, by comparison to these other, more nuanced styles, can sometimes seem just a tad crude or even vulgar. Made well, though, they can be beautiful things, whether consumed fresh from the tank or after years of aging.

And anyway, nothing but a parka takes the edge off the February chill as swiftly a giant stout or barleywine, whether it's 40-below in Omaha or 40-above in Hamilton City. □