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## CHOW

# Farmhouse brew

**The subtle pleasures of the saison**

Summer may have ended last month, but now temperatures have climbed back into the 70s and 80s, and it hasn't felt like fall.

Thankfully, saisons are still flowing. Traditionally a light summer beer in the balmy countryside of Belgium and France, this style has survived through the ages and into the craft beer era with the persistence and class of a brew that has few haters. Yet at the same time, saisons don't get a whole lot of love.

by Alastair Bland

"They've very undervalued," says Jonathan Massman, the brewer at San Rafael's Pond Farm Brewing Co. "If they were exposed to more people, they would really catch on."

Saisons are often termed "farmhouse" ales and were traditionally brewed in barns during the winter/spring to be ready to quench the thirst of the working class during the summer. Made using locally sourced strains of yeast, saisons embody the fragrant summertime terroir of rural northern Europe more poignantly than many other styles.

The distinguishing characteristics include spicy, fruity and mildly earthy flavors that are produced largely by the yeast. Massman says many saisons taste of allspice, pepper and "maybe some bubblegum." The beers sometimes carry scents of hay, barn, horse and goat—the marks of the *Brettanomyces* yeast sometimes used in fermentation and aging. Saisons also tend to fall lower on the alcohol spectrum, which can make them suitable as lunchtime or session beers.



PHOTO BY BUBBY (VIA FLICKR)

Pond Farm is currently pouring two saisons—Saison Automne, made in the traditional Belgian mold, and Sgt. Peppercorn's Strawberry Saison, made with strawberry puree, pink peppercorns and hibiscus.

In Berkeley, Gilman Brewing Co. makes roughly a dozen saisons. These include French and Belgian styles, fermented with and without *Brettanomyces*, some with added fruits such as plum, peach, blackberry and cranberry, others aged in oak barrels. Sean Wells, Gilman's owner and brewmaster, regards saisons as one of his favorite styles.

"The versatility of the style is amazing," he says. "Lots of people use these as gimmick beers and throw in a bunch of crap, but the breadth of flavors you can get from just water, barley, hops and yeast is amazing. Simply tweaking the temperature of fermentation for a given beer can result in a whole new flavor profile."

Wells suggests that newcomers to the style watch for various markers of a good saison—dry, fully fermented beer with a crisp finish and a range of flavors, including rich grains, pepper and stone fruit.

While traditional boundaries are important, Massman says he does enjoy the flexibility and diversity of the style. For example, he recently traveled in Hawaii where he came

across (and tasted) a dragonfruit-lime saison.

"It still had all the Belgian phenolics and was basically a Hawaiian take on the style," he says.

Massman believes the common link between all saisons is the small family of yeast strains used for primary fermentation. Beyond that, he says, virtually anything goes.

Locally, Sierra Nevada Brewing Co. paid respect to the style's roots by open-fermenting its Estate Farmhouse in a local peach orchard and allowing the valley yeasts to spontaneously do their thing before aging the beer in wine barrels. The result is a complex blend of subdued flavors—sweet, tart and funky.

To Massman, "the benchmark standard" is the Saison Dupont, brewed in Belgium but widely available in California. It's brewed in a traditional style and often is noted for its fruity, spicy character.

Some beer styles, like the IPA, conquer the world; others, like pumpkin beers, teeter on the verge of commercial extinction. It's all but certain that saisons will never approach the level of popularity enjoyed by the IPA, for such is the power and appeal of the almighty hop. But appreciated for its subtleties, the saison will always have a place at the table. □