

Slow and low

Spirit-barrel-aged beers don't have to be high in alcohol

A notable wheat beer is now flowing from taps at Pond Farm Brewing in San Rafael. The beer, brewed with grapefruit, offers a peculiar flavor of oak and tequila—the signature marks of a beer aged in spirit barrels. In this case, tequila barrels did the job.

“It’s reminiscent of a cocktail,” said Trevor Martens, co-founder and brewer at Pond Farm.

by
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The beer is named Palomarin—a play on the Point Reyes trailhead of the same name and the Paloma cocktail.

What really makes it stand out is its alcohol level of just 5.5 percent by volume. That’s pretty much average for beer, but it’s very much below average for a booze-barrel-aged beer.

“At 5.5 percent, it’s very drinkable; drinkable but still has that oaky flavor from the barrel,” Martens said.

Until recently, anyone wishing for a hit of that particular flavor had little choice but to drink a strong—and expensive—beer. That’s because virtually all spirit-barrel-aged beers contain between 9 percent and 13 percent ABV with many as high as 15 percent. And they are often priced at a dollar or more per ounce.

But lower-alcohol options are becoming more plentiful. The first one I ever noticed was Anderson Valley’s Bourbon Barrel Stout—the brewery’s classic oatmeal stout aged for three months in Wild Turkey barrels. The final product contains just 6.9 percent ABV. Firestone Walker also makes a relatively modest oatmeal stout aged in spirit barrels.

While the trend is still undeveloped, there seems to be enough chatter about it online that I expect we’ll see more low-ABV spirit-barrel beers in the near future.

In the early 1990s, Goose Island Brewing Co. in Chicago poured its high-alcohol stout into some empty Jim Beam barrels as an experiment. What came out of those casks—an oaky, coconutty, vanilla-flavored stout as strong as wine—was quite unlike anything ever brewed before, and it spawned a whole new way of making and aging beer. The brewery’s Bourbon



County Stout ranges between 12 percent and 15 percent ABV, and it became a benchmark for the style and quality of spirit-barrel-aged beers. Since then, hundreds of breweries have aged countless beers in whiskey, rye, brandy, sherry, tequila and rum barrels, with the phenomenon going relatively mainstream about 15 years ago.

Spirit-barrel-aged beers—as opposed to those aged in wine or unused oak barrels, such as sours, saisons and other traditional European styles—are aggressive and hard-hitting. You need not be an attuned taster or a cicerone to detect the effects of the barrel and the booze it once contained. Moreover, these beers tend to be big styles to begin with, like imperial stouts, barleywines and some Belgian-style ales—beers already high in alcohol that often end up even stronger with the barrel treatment, either by absorbing more alcohol from the liquor-soaked wood or because of continued fermentation during the aging process.

Their high-alcohol level has brought these beers much acclaim and notoriety, but lately I feel there’s been some consumer fatigue.

One challenge that Pond Farm faced as Martens and his crew kegged their new lower-alcohol rendition was how much to charge for it. Generally, high-alcohol barrel-aged beers are among the most expensive, and are also served in smaller glasses. The barrels for the lower ABV versions still take up space and add time to the process, but the base beer requires fewer ingredients.

They settled in the middle: Palomarin is now pouring for 8 bucks per 13-ounce glass. It’s available only at the taproom, but you can get Anderson Valley’s Bourbon Barrel Stout at beer stores everywhere—for about \$10 per 22 ounce bottle. □

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