

Dessert in a bottle

Pastry stouts are a (sweet) thing

In the brewing of beer, ingredients often are added for flavor contrast. Chili peppers, for example,

by
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sharply confront just about every other flavor element in a beer. Salt can settle the acidity of a sour beer. Even the bitter hops in beer are meant to offset the sweetness of sugary malt.

But other times, ingredients are added to amplify a beer's flavors, and this method could hardly be better demonstrated than with one particular style now trending: pastry stouts. They may sound over-the-top, and often they are—sweet, tar-black stouts or porters blown up with additions of chocolate, caramel, molasses, marshmallows, maple syrup, dried fruit and other sweet, sticky ingredients. Pastry stouts frequently are brewed in explicit themes of brownies, crème brûlée and chocolate peanut-butter candies. Other pastry stouts are taken more in the direction of milky, fudgy beverages.

In Chico, Secret Trail Brewing Co. has embraced the style by using its Baltic porter as the base. Variations have included the Peanut Butter on My Baltic, Tiramisu Baltic porter and the Choconut pastry Baltic porter (currently on tap and in bottles) with added chocolate and coconut.

Pond Farm Brewing in San Rafael recently released its first pastry stout—a beer brewed in collaboration with Johnny Doughnuts to emulate the Bay Area chain's chocolate salted caramel old-fashioned doughnut. The beer's recipe incorporates the doughnut shop's proprietary spice blend, plus vanilla beans, cacao nibs and lactose, and is available on tap at the brewery and in cans.

Fieldwork Brewing Co. has built some of its reputation on brewing these sorts of luscious, rich stouts, often with milk, coconut and/or chocolate—like Eliza, billed as a New Orleans iced coffee imperial milk stout; Luke's Diner, a coffee maple stout; and The Baker, a double brownie stout.



High Water Brewing in Lodi makes the classic Campfire Stout. Reportedly brewed with more than 2 tons of graham cracker meal per batch, the beer is an ode to s'mores. Coronado Brewing Co. in San Diego makes a German chocolate cake stout. Oskar Blues and Cigar City recently collaborated to make Bamburana, an imperial stout aged in whiskey and brandy barrels with dates, figs and "spirals" of Amburana wood.

At Marin Brewing Co., brewer Arne Johnson says he prefers "non-pastry stouts." His Marin Airporter chocolate porter is "the closest thing" to a pastry stout that he makes, he says. Indeed, lacking the comical, almost absurd additions of things like cheesecake and ice cream, the beer doesn't quite qualify.

Which is fine. After all, pastry stouts aren't for everyone. To some purists, rich, dessert-like black beers are a bit too much, if not overwhelming. Mike Altman, owner of Iron Springs Pub and Brewery in Fairfax, says he likes chocolate stouts, but not sweet ones.

"If we were going to brew anything like a pastry stout, we might use a really nice Belgian baking chocolate, but no sweetener," he says.

How to define a pastry stout isn't clear, as the beers do not constitute a recognized "style" defined by the Beer Judge Certification Program, which catalogs every beer style and describes in detail the components and criteria essential to each. Today, in the informal origin period for the pastry stout, just about any black beer with at least two added ingredients that pump up sweetness and flavor seem to fit the bill.

While some beer types that trend into wild popularity eventually die out, others go mainstream. (The best recent example is the hazy IPA.) For pastry stouts, another year or two will probably tell whether they're here to stay, or are just another passing wave in the endlessly creative sea of craft beer. □

The porters and pastry porters of Secret Trail.
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