

Wheat beers can be enjoyed year-round

Wheat: it's everywhere.

So much so that at slightly over 600 million tons, it's the world's third most harvested cereal/grain (only corn and rice are grown more).

Wheat is considered to be one of the globe's staple crops and has a wide range of uses, especially as a food source. Its main use has been in the creation of flour, which then allows us to construct other foods like bread, pasta, cakes and breakfast cereal. The wheat husks can also be eaten, and we generally refer to this product as bran.

Beyond being a human food source, wheat is also a prime forage crop for animals, and a source of roofing thatch.

As far as alcohol is concerned, wheat is a primary source for making the distillate used in premium vodka. While vodka is a fine spirit, today we will review how wheat is used to create beer. Wheat is most commonly used in the creation of specialty brews known as wheat ales, or the darker Dunkels (wheat ales made with darker or toasted wheat malt). Wheat is also the primary component used in sour ales such as Berliner Weisse, Gose, and Lambic Ales. Additionally, some bocks (especially the Eisbocks) use wheat as a component in their creation.

What is different in the process of creating wheat-based ales? The only difference is the use of malted wheat in conjunction with malted barley. In the traditional brewing process, barley is steeped in hot water (to soften it) and allowed to partially germinate. This process makes the sugar in the grain easily accessible and thus will allow fermentation to easily take place. The exact same process is used on the wheat, thus creating malted wheat for use in fermentation.

Where did the idea of wheat-based beer originate, you may wonder? Although wheat may have been used as a grain-source for the earliest of beers, what we think of as wheat beer is generally attributed to either Germany or Belgium, and I suspect that also depends on who you ask. In Germany, tradition (and the German purity laws) dictates that wheat beer be a mixture containing at least 50 per cent wheat malt in order to be categorized as a wheat beer. In Belgium, the traditional wheat beers often use unmalted wheat and add flavourings like orange peel and coriander.

So, why are they usually called white ales? Unlike barley, which has a large husk that is used as a natural filter, wheat has a small husk which does not allow for the complete filtering of the water that has soaked up all the sugar from the grain (this sugared water is called wort). This allows wheat protein to pass into the liquid. Even in the finished product, this wheat protein shows itself as a haze that gives the ale a white appearance. Now, one might ask why this protein isn't

filtered out using more technological methods. The answer is simply tradition and taste. This is the way wheat ales have always been made, and for a good reason. Having the wheat protein in the ale imparts more flavour to the beer.

What do wheat ales taste like? Generally, one can expect wheat ales to exude flavours of citrus (think orange and apricot) and spice (think coriander and clove). Oftentimes, through brewing techniques, a brewer can emphasize different aspects of the wheat ale's flavour profile. Some whites may seem more citrus-y, while other may seem spicier.

Additionally, wheat ales are generally used as the base beer for many flavoured ales. The light body, and light flavours of the wheat ale make it nearly ideal for highlighting additional flavours that a brewer may wish to add. Products like Garrison's Raspberry Wheat Ale and St. Ambroise's Apricot Wheat Ale showcase this effect well.

Wheat ales are quickly becoming a wonderful summer staple as they are very refreshing beers. Personally, I think that wheat ales are good year-round, especially if you're looking to match them up with some light-bodied food. They are particularly good with seafood and salads.

Recommendations:

- * Hoegaarden (Belgium) 330 ml \$2.30/bottle
- * Konig Ludwig Weissbier (Germany) 500 ml \$3.59/bottle
- * Erdinger Dunkel (Germany) 500 ml \$3.95/bottle
- * Unibroue Blance de Chambly (Quebec) 341 ml \$13.95/6-Pack

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