

Top glass

Of all the bars in all the world - here's what's best to drink.

This year's Champion Beer of Britain will be chosen next Tuesday, in a blindfold tasting, by a panel comprising brewers, publicans, writers on drink and members of the Campaign for Real Ale. Drinkers have their own favourites, but what makes a beer great? The judges will be looking for brews with flavour - plenty of sweet nutty malt, dry flowery hop and yeasty fruitiness - in a tempting, satisfying balance. Alcohol content is not an issue; in the past, a flavoursome beer of 3.5 per cent has beaten brews twice as potent. Having done the job myself often enough, I am sure there will be heartfelt, rigorous arguments before a winner is agreed. The victor is likely to be a beer with all those attributes shaped into an emphatic character of its own. The winner will be announced at the opening of the campaign's week-long Great British Beer Festival at Olympia, London. Having systematically sampled beers for more than 20 years, I have my own list of current favourites, not just British but from all over the world.

Ten great British draught beers

Light Bitter: Summer Lightning, superbly fragrant and quenching. A relative newcomer, gradually establishing itself as a classic. From the Hop Back brewery of Salisbury, Wiltshire. Bitter: Brakspear's, of Henley. For a moreish hoppiness, deriving from the most English of varieties, Fuggles and Goldings. Strong Bitter: Fuller's Extra Special Bitter; from London. For its power of malt and hop. Pale Ale: Marston's Pedigree, from Burton-upon-Trent, Britain's brewing capital. For its complexity of flavours and especially its fruitiness. Perfect with English lamb. Dark Mild: Highgate, from Walsall, in the West Midlands. For its smooth malt and iron flavours. A restorative brew. Narrowly ahead of neighbour Banks's.

Old Ale: Old Peculier, from Theakston's, of Masham, Yorkshire. For its satisfying richness of malt and fruit. Yorkshire Ale: Black Sheep, also from Masham. For the soothing roundness created by fermentation in stone squares.

Scottish Ale: Merman, from Caledonian, of Edinburgh. An astonishingly malty, sustaining ale.

Welsh Ale: Brain's Dark, from Cardiff. Low in alcohol, relatively full in body Full of toasty flavours. A breakfast beer?

Barley Wine: Norman's Conquest (7.0 per cent), from the Cottage Brewery, of West Lydford, Somerset Peppery, spicy perfumy and warming. Try it with a strong Cheddar.

Ten great British bottled brews

Pale Ale 1: Worthington White Shield, from Burton. Yes, you can still get it... and the yeast sediment is good for you.

Pale Ale 2: King and Barnes' Festive, from Horsham, Sussex. An almost herbal-tasting ale from a brewery that specialises in bottle-matured brews. Strong ale 1: Young's Special London Ale (6.4 per cent). For its appetising aromatic hoppiness. Strong Ale 2: Lees' Harvest Ale (11.5 per cent). The creamiest of Manchester Old Ale 1 :The winey Strong Suffolk, from Greene King, of Bury St. Edmund's. Try it with pickled herrings.

Old Ale 2: Gale's Prize Old Ale, from Homdean, Hampshire. The beer world's answer to a Calvados. Barley Wine: Thomas Hardy's Ale, from Dorchester Lay it down for five years. The beer world's answer to an Oloroso sherry.

Stout 1: Samuel Smith's Oatmeal Stout, from Tadcaster, Yorkshire. As smooth as it gets. Stout 2: Courage's Imperial Russian Stout Liquid Christmas pudding.

Scottish Ale: Traquair House, from the castle of the same name, in the borders. A warming, oaky earthy classic.

Ten great imported brews (not lagers) (The first six are from Belgium)

Fruit beer: Rose de Gambrinus, a tart raspberry brew based on a wild-yeast lambic.

Spiced wheat beer: The coriander-ish Hoegaarden. Sour beer: The oak-aged Rodenbach, the world's most refreshing beer. Day Trappist: The magnificently bitter Orval, the ultimate aperitif.

Sweet Trappist : The port-like Chimay Grand Rserve. Golden Ale: Duvel. Looks like a golden lager; tastes like a pear brandy. Dark Wheat Beer: Aventinus, from Germany Liquid toffee-apples.

Strong bire de Garde: Trois Monts (8.5), a winey brew from France.

Stout: Guinness Foreign Extra Stout (7.5), from Dublin. A classic version.

Ale: Anchor Liberty. A hoppy Martini-like brew from the United States.

Ten great lagers

Pilsner Urquell: The hoppy original, from the city of Pilsen, in the Czech Republic.

Budwar: A maltier golden lager from the inspirational city of Budweis, also in the Czech Republic. Samichlaus: A super-strong (14 per cent) reddish-brown lager from Switzerland. Pauloner SoWutor: A famous dark-brown lager from Bavaria, at a mighty 7.5 per cent. Schienkerla Rauchbier: Another Bavarian dark lager; in which the malts are smoked over beechwood. Kostritzer Schwarzbier: A "black" lager; tasting of bitter chocolate, from the former East Germany. Bitburger: An elegantly hoppy Pilsener-type from the Rhineland.

Jever: An abrasively hoppy Pilsener-type from German Friesland (Also as Marks and Spencer's own-brand Original Pilsener).

St. Chnstoffel Blond: A Dutch golden lager that is a hoppy classic.

Brooklyn Lager: A muscular, bronze lager from New York.

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