

Brown Ales

Once upon a time, all beers were dark beers.

Malt is the ingredient that gives beer color. Malt, or germinated barley, needs to be dried before it can be used to brew beer and prior to the 17th century, crude malt drying techniques left the malt dark or smoky. The result - a dark, or smoky beer. While the flavors of brown beers centuries ago probably varied a good bit from what we know today, the color of beer was often brown, or darker.

Today, malt is available in a wide range of strains and colors, with the darker malts providing the color of a Brown Ale. Brown malt is typically the malt used to create Brown Ales and brown malt can be made by simply baking pale malt at low temperatures until it reaches the desired color. (This process also works to create amber malt for Amber Ales.)

Food Pairings

Brown Ales pair beautifully with red meats and chocolate. English Browns are great with pork, while American Browns tend to favor beef. Great foods with almost any Brown Ale would be apple pie, pork with brown sauce, beef vegetable soup and cheddar cheese.

Brown Ales are typically divided into two main categories: American Brown and English Brown ales.

English Brown Ales

Mild

A light-flavored, malt-accented beer that is readily suited to drinking in quantity. Refreshing, yet flavorful. Some versions may seem like lower gravity brown porters.

History: May have evolved as one of the elements of early porters.

In modern terms, the name "mild" refers to the relative lack of hop bitterness (i.e. less hoppy than a pale ale, and not so strong). Originally, the "mildness" may have referred to the fact that this beer was young and did not yet have the moderate sourness that aged batches had. Somewhat rare in England, good versions may still be found in the Midlands around Birmingham.

Examples: Moorhouse Black Cat, Highgate Mild, Brain's Dark, Banks's Mild, Coach House Gunpowder Strong Mild, Gale's Festival Mild, Woodforde's Norfolk Nog, Goose Island PMD Mild

Southern English Brown Ale

A luscious, malt-oriented brown ale, with a caramel, dark fruit complexity of malt flavor. May seem somewhat like a smaller version of a sweet stout or a sweet version of a dark mild.

History: English brown ales are generally split into sub-styles along geographic lines. Southern English (or "London-style") brown ales are darker, sweeter, and lower gravity than their Northern cousins.

Examples: Mann's Brown Ale (bottled, but not available in the US), Tolly Cobbold Cobnut Nut Brown Ale

Northern English Brown Ale

Drier and more hop-oriented than southern English brown ale, with a nutty character rather than caramel.

Examples: Newcastle Brown Ale, Samuel Smith's Nut Brown Ale, Tolly Cobbold Cobnut Special Nut Brown Ale, Goose Island Hex Nut Brown Ale

American Brown Ales

American Brown ales are often hoppy beers that were originated by American home brewers trying to create a richer, maltier version of an American Pale or Amber ale. American Brown ales are typically noted for their hop content, but contain rich chocolate and caramel malt flavors. American Brown Ales tend to emphasize hop flavor (bitter) more than the sweeter, English Brown Ales. However, American Brown Ales are also well balanced, rich beers.

Look for our upcoming article on American Ales, in which we will delve further into the American Brown Ale style.

Belgian Brown Ales

Belgium also brews its own version of a Brown Ale, which are classified as Sour Ales. They are completely different from both the English and American Brown Ales and we will consider them separately in our Sour Ale article.