

Pale Ales

Prior to the 17th century, almost every beer was dark in color. The reason - malt. One of the most basic ingredients of beer, malt is also the primary contributor to the color of beer and most malt used prior to 1600 tended to be darker in color than many malts used today.

Before it can be used to brew beer, malt needs to be dried and in centuries past, the drying process usually consisted of heating the malt. Furnaces and kilns in use prior to 1600 tended to produce uneven, unreliable temperatures which led to dark colored malts that created dark beer.

In the early part of the 17th century, trees were fast disappearing from the forests of Europe and the search for an alternative to wood burning ovens became increasingly important. As wood became scarcer, the concept of using coke (charred coal) for fuel became popular and in 1642, a coke oven was used for the first time to dry malt in Derbyshire, England. And although it took many more decades for the process to become widespread in malt drying, a revolution had begun. The Industrial Revolution, in fact.

Coke became a superior fuel to wood and regular coal, because the "coking" process eliminates most of the foul, smelly elements of the coal. Once "coked," coal becomes a much cleaner burning fuel and ovens fueled by coke dry malt with much less contamination to the malt, leaving it cleaner in taste. Advances in oven technology during this time also allowed for better temperature control of coke ovens, making it possible to dry malt at lower temperatures, leaving the malt pale and light in color.

[Click here to read more about the modern malting process at the Briess Malt website.](#)

Pale Ales typically emphasize hoppy, or bitter flavors more than the malty, sweet flavors. The subtle nature of pale malts allows the malt flavor to be important in the beer, while allowing hop flavor to dominate.

English Bitters

The British commonly refer to their Pale Ales as bitters. In fact, the British categorize their bitters differently depending on the alcohol content of the beer. Bitters are beers up to 4% alcohol by volume (abv) and tend to be beers that are consumed in large quantities, or when a less strong beer is desired. These beers are sometimes referred to as **Ordinary** or **Session Bitters**.

Beers from 4.1% to 4.7% abv are usually called **Best** or **Regular Bitters**. This type of beer is the most common type of Pale Ale found in Britain.

Extra Special Bitters, sometimes called **Premium** or **Strong Bitters**, are those Pales that are 4.8% abv and above.

In the late nineteenth century, Burton-On-Trent became rather famous for brewing what were widely regarded as the best Pale Ales in England. Export of the so-called **Burton Ales** became a huge business for brewers in Burton, until it was realized that the quality and mineral content of Burton water was responsible for the amazing Burton beers. Chemists were eventually able to reproduce Burton water outside of the Burton area and the brewing business in Burton suffered as a result.

American Pale Ales

In America, the word "bitter" doesn't seem to work so well, as it tends to lead people to believe that they are going to taste something objectionable in a beer called "bitter." Long ago, Americans settled on the term Pale Ale to describe their own bitter beers and today they are commonly called **American Pale Ales**.

Like their British "bitter" counterparts, American Pale Ales derive most of their flavor from hops. However, American hops tend to have a more citrusy or piney flavor to them and they are typically stronger than British hops. Therefore, American Pale Ales often have a more distinct hop character to them while spotlighting different hop flavors than English Bitters.

Hybrids

Some beers defy categorization as either an ale or a lager. For example, **Kolsch** beers (Cologne, Germany) are brewed with a yeast that works a little like both ale and lager yeast. It ferments at cooler ale temperatures (55 - 65 degrees) and the beer is lagered for about a month before it is ready to be served. Additionally, **Altbiers** (also from Germany) can be brewed either as lagers or ales. Some use lager yeast while others use ale yeast.

Cuisine



English Pale Ales (Bitters) are especially well suited for peppery, spicy cuisine like Indian, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern food, fish, and shellfish. American Pale Ales pair well with Asian cuisine, salads and poultry.

Drink Pale Ales in a pint glass.