

Tapping In To Beer

Lager, cerveza, a brewski, a pint, an oat soda or a barley pop - Call it what you like, but we just can't deny the international appeal of beer. And why should we? Humans have been fermenting crude sugar and starch libations since at least 7000 BC and although the recipes may have changed dramatically, the motives of brewers and drinkers remain the same. Beer drinking worldwide is synonymous with celebration, relaxation and, believe it or not, flavor.

Making beer is as simple as it has always been – a grain, like barley, is soaked in water and then roasted to produce “malt.” The malt is boiled, mixed with yeast, then left to ferment into alcohol. During the fermentation, individual brewers give their beer its own unique flavor by adding fruit, herbs and, most commonly, hops flowers. While the alcohol content of a beer is determined by the amount of malt used, it's the temperature of the fermentation process that determines the beer's character. Ales are hearty, almost fruity beers that have been fermented at higher temperatures for shorter periods of time. Lagers, the most popular beers, undergo a second fermentation at lower temperatures, giving them a smooth, crisp taste. Very dark beers, like stouts, are brewed from a dark malt that's been roasted for a longer time.

But before there were ales, lagers and stouts, there was just *beer*. The earliest brews – sour, acidic, likely undrinkable by today's standards - were produced in family homes, using any local grain available. Although hops and other herbs were occasionally added for flavor, it wasn't until the 13th century that artisan breweries in the small towns of Germany perfected an appealing balance of malt and hops, the hopped beer flavor that's familiar today. With the advent of the steam engine, the assembly line and, of course, professional sporting events, the scale of worldwide beer production skyrocketed. Beer was fast on its way to becoming the world's most popular alcoholic beverage.

My own travels have exposed me to local liquors of every stripe, from the potent fermented mare's milk of Mongolia to the sunny Champagnes of France. Every culture may have an alcohol to call its own, but alongside it there will always be beer. And just as you can travel your taste buds with exotic local foods, sampling local brews in quaint wood-paneled pubs, beachside bamboo huts or big-tented festivals is a wonderful way to engage in the peculiarities of local culture. Here are a few great beer destinations to consider for your next holiday.

Germany – The Fatherland

Here's how serious Germans are about beer – Not only are they credited with perfecting modern hopped beer, they also enacted the Bavarian Purity Law of 1516, dictating a strict shortlist of legal ingredients to be used in German beer. Though the law was officially repealed in 1987, most German brewers continue to adhere to it by only using water, barley, yeast and hops in the production of their heavenly pilsners, helles and bocks.

Sloan Schang
Tapping In To Beer
Interval World Magazine, Spring 2008

Those who diverge from tradition usually do so by adding wheat, producing tangy and bubbly weizens.

Visitors looking for the best German beer should head to Bavaria, home to the snow-capped peaks of the German Alps, the lush river Rhine and the brewery capitol of Munich. In Bavaria, beer and camaraderie flow like water, whether you're enjoying a tall pilsner in a misty mountain lodge or a zesty hefeweizen on Munich's Marienplatz (public square), beneath the summer sun and daily glockenspiel performances. Just make sure you arrive thirsty – German beer is usually served by the liter and leaving even a drop behind is a social gaffe.

Beer Attractions: The grandest beer festival in the world happens here every fall, spread over the sixteen days leading up to the first October in Sunday. Munich is Oktoberfest central, and millions of people gather here to sing, dance, eat and imbibe about six million mugs of the freshest German beer. Can't make it for Oktoberfest? Visit the most famous beer hall in the world, the Hofbräuhaus am Platzl, any time you're in Munich. And If you want to see what really makes German beer great, take a tour of the Hofbräu brewery, founded in 1589.

England – Pint Perfect

The Germans may throw a good party, but you'll be hard pressed to find a country that does pub culture better than England. Ales and Lagers have been a mainstay of the English palate since the Middle Ages and no drinking establishment is as welcoming as the British public house. There are some 14,000 pubs in the United Kingdom, each operating as a kind of community center for swapping stories and downing frosty pints of local ale.

English tradition favors ales over lagers and not surprisingly, some of the best ale brands in the world originate here. You're likely familiar with famous exports like Boddingtons bitter ale and Newcastle brown ale but discovering lesser known regional brews can be just as rewarding. To get a taste, head for the coastal counties of Devon and Cornwall in southwest England. Here, you can stroll gentle ocean shores or hike dramatic sandstone cliffs by day, before tucking in to one of the hundreds of creamy ales produced in the West Country.

Beer Attractions: The star of the southwest beer scene is Tuckers Maltings in Newton Abbot, Devon. One of the last remaining Victorian malthouses in the UK, Tuckers has been producing malt from locally grown barley for more than 100 years and supplies thirty English ale makers with their base ingredient. It's the only malthouse in England open to the public and their tour includes a tasting of the ales spilling from the on-site Teignworthy Brewery. Plan to visit Devon in late April when Tuckers hosts the Maltings Beer Festival, where you can gulp 140 different ales from 35 West Country brewers.

Thailand - Spicy Paradise, Cold Beer

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Thailand is a feast, often literally, for the senses. Bright colors and exotic scents envelop everyone who sets foot on the cosmopolitan pavement of bustling Bangkok or the powdery beaches of Phuket. More than anywhere else in the world, Thailand is a country to be tasted. Whether it be cheap and savory noodle dishes from sidewalk vendors or five-star seafood curries, there'll be a fire in your mouth. And chances are good that when you reach for a beverage to cool your chops, there's going to be a Singha beer in your hand.

Thailand may not have the storied beer traditions of Germany and England (beer wasn't brewed here until the 1930s), Singha is no slouch – the Boon Rawd brewery responsible for the national lager is a strict follower of the Bavarian Purity Law. Served ice cold, Singha beer is perfect with a rich panang curry or a hot day on the beaches of Pattaya.

Beer Attractions: The Boon Rawd brewery an hour outside of Bangkok offers worthwhile tours of their German style brewery. And in a country renowned for its frequent cultural and religious festivals, there may be no better time for indulgent celebration than the boisterous Songkran Festival (Thai New Year) held nationwide in April. Really though, there's no better attraction than a tropical Thai sunset, Singha in hand.

Williamsburg USA – Budweiser Behemoth

I once ordered a beer in China, mistakenly pointing to the Chinese characters for “import beer” on the menu. The import I received was a Budweiser. Budweiser, it turns out, is everywhere and for better or worse, no other beer brand is as identified with America. The brewery may have been founded by German immigrants, but its leading brand is openly divergent from the Bavarian Purity Law – most notably for the addition of rice to the malt to achieve a lighter taste.

American per capita beer consumption ranks 14th in the world market, well behind Germany (third) and the UK (sixth), but that doesn't mean Americans aren't crazy about the stuff. And you'll work hard to not find a bar, restaurant or convenience store here that doesn't offer the familiar pale fizz of Bud. Famously headquartered in St. Louis Missouri, Anheuser Busch operates twelve breweries around the United States, like the one in Williamsburg, Virginia that's capable of brewing 10 million barrels a year. Williamsburg itself is a picturesque crossroads of beer and America's beginnings, where you can stroll the leafy colonial streets of our national founders and have an easy time finding fresh kegs of America's most popular bubbly.

Beer Attractions: While the Anheuser Busch brewery in Williamsburg is no longer open to tours, you can still get a taste of the company's colossal legacy at Busch Gardens Europe, a theme park filled with amusement rides, Broadway-style shows and plenty of Anheuser Busch history. And if you make plans to visit in May, head to nearby Norfolk, VA for the Virginia Beer Festival, featuring glasses of the best from three-dozen domestic and international breweries.

Colorado - Microbrew HQ

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Americans may love successful giants like Budweiser, but they also love an underdog. There are more than 1,400 microbreweries – small craft brewers that produce limited volumes for regional distribution – in operation in the US today. Microbrewers value local ingredients and the art of beer making over concerns of mass appeal and their homegrown recipes produce a staggering array of delicious brews; everything from the traditional European lagers to funky concoctions flavored with coriander and lavender.

And no state encapsulates the diversity of American microbreweries quite like Colorado. Home to another American mega-brewer, Coors, the state also boasts nearly 100 individual craft brewers. If you're visiting Colorado, there's no better place to base yourself than the multi-seasonal Rocky Mountain playgrounds of Vail and Breckenridge. Recreation begets relaxation and these charming mountain villages answer with their own local microbrew pubs, like Breckenridge Brewery and its homegrown ales and seasonal creations. You'll find many of the best Colorado microbrews flowing from the après-ski taps of any Vail or Breckenridge pub.

Beer Attractions: Most of Colorado's microbrews originate in the mile-high plains in and around Denver. These breweries, like New Belgium Brewery and its steadily growing Fat Tire brand ale, are the real gems of the craft beer trade. New Belgium in Ft. Collins offers entertaining tours of its operation, the first wind-powered brewery in the United States. And to experience the ultimate in microbrew festivals, plan a day trip to downtown Denver in October to attend The Great American Beer Festival, featuring a dizzying 3,000 American craft beers.

New York - Upstart in Upstate

Just as there's more to American beer than Budweiser, there's more to New York than Manhattan. The Catskill Mountains rise gracefully from the green bends of the Hudson River Valley, a short two hours outside of NYC. City lights give way to star light in upstate New York, a slow world apart from the bustle of the Big Apple and the perfect setting for another cluster of great American microbreweries.

There are a handful of working microbreweries scattered between Rochester and Albany, though no location is as poetic as Cooperstown, the birthplace of baseball and now home to the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Baseball and beer have been together since the beginning, so it's fitting that Ommegang Brewery, an award-winning brewer of traditional Belgian style ale, is located nearby. Ommegang describes its ales as "functional art" and the company epitomizes the microbrewery tradition of using local resources – many of its ales are aged in the nearby Howe Caverns, a winding cave system that maintains an ideal 52 degree Fahrenheit temperature year round.

Beer Attractions: There's a lot to see in Cooperstown and around the rolling forests of the Catskills, but when you get thirsty head to the Ommegang Brewery and take a tour of their farmhouse brewery (tasting included), just five miles south of Cooperstown. Plan to visit in August and you'll be rewarded with the Belgium Comes To Cooperstown beer festival, a home run showcase of the Belgium brewing tradition in America.



English Style Beer Battered Fish and Chips

Ingredients:

For the Fish

- 1-1/2 cups of your favorite pale ale, flattened to remove carbonation
- 2 cups flour
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1 tsp. pepper
- 1 tsp. onion powder
- 1/4 tsp. turmeric
- 2 lbs. fillet of cod
- Oil for deep-frying

For the Chips

- 5 large baking potatoes
- Oil for deep-frying

For the Chips: With the vegetable oil heating in a deep fryer or saucepan, slice and clean potato wedges, patting them dry to remove extra moisture. Add wedges to deep fryer when the vegetable oil has reached 375 degrees F. Remove them when they are golden brown, season to taste.

For the Fish: To prepare the beer batter, first mix together flour, pepper, onion powder and turmeric. Add the beer and egg, mixing only enough to moisten the dry ingredients. If the batter is too thin, add more flour, if too thick, add more beer.

Slice the fish fillets into several strips and coat them in flour before dipping in the batter. Once coated, and place in 375 degrees F cooking oil to deep fry. Cook until golden (about 6-10 minutes, turning occasionally). Remove from oil, drain on paper towels. Serve immediately.

Stout Braised Chicken And Vegetables

- 2 to 4 chicken breasts
- 12 ounces of stout beer
- Four tablespoons chili sauce
- 1/4 c. flour
- 4 potatoes, peeled & quartered
- 2 stalks celery
- 4 carrots, peeled & quartered

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- 1/2 c. onion, chopped

Brown chicken lightly in small amount of vegetable oil. Combine with other ingredients (except for flour) in a covered casserole and bake at 350 degrees for 1 1/2 hours. Mix flour with a small amount of cold water, then add to sauce periodically to thicken. Continue cooking, covered, until the sauce is thickened. Serve sauce separately, to be spooned over the chicken and vegetables. Garnish with parsley and serve with warm rolls.