



THE YEAR IN BEER

Beer consumption may be down, but our thirst for quality, different and downright delicious beers is on the up. We wrap up the beer trends for the year and bring you 50 of the very best brews that are guaranteed to surprise.

WORDS JAMES SMITH

Can you declare a year in which beer consumption in Australia dropped to its lowest level in more than 60 years a great year for beer? If you're interested in craft beer, the answer is a resounding yes. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, 2012 has been a milestone year for the nation's smaller brewers.

While the major players have been contemplating plummeting sales and takeovers, elsewhere it's been a tale of almost universal growth. A wave of new breweries have opened with only a tiny handful falling by the wayside, beer-centric bars have sprung up in the unlikeliest of spots, brewers have been experimenting like never before, and the quality and consistency of beer from microbreweries is on the rise.

Photography // Alamy, courtesy GABS, Stone & Wood and Tasmanian Beer Fest.

PICTURED

(clockwise from above) Appreciation for craft beer is on the rise; a growing number of beer styles are being made; Stone & Wood is one recent success story.

(opposite, top to bottom) The Great Australasian Beer Spectacular was a hit at Melbourne's Good Beer Week, with one-off beers brewed for the event; Hobart's annual Tasmanian Beer Fest.

The upper echelon of Australian brewers is capable of producing beers as good as any of the wealth of classy imports arriving on these shores, coming in ever-greater numbers as international brewers realise just how thirsty we've become for better beer. Brendan Varis, from Western Australia's Feral Brewing, and Richard Watkins, from Canberra's Wig & Pen, were popular and deserving winners of the Champion Australian Brewery titles at this year's Australian International Beer Awards, although I suspect the brew team of Shawn Sherlock and Ian Watson at Murray's in Port Stephens, New South Wales, would run them close if they actually entered their beers.

The buzz around craft beer reflects the global picture. Having first taken hold in the US, brewers and drinkers across the globe are exploring the possibilities of beer, whether reinvigorating old styles or creating their own. Hop and malt suppliers are developing new varieties to satisfy this demand, with newer Aussie varieties such as Galaxy and Stella appearing with regularity in beers across Europe and the US. Closer to home in New Zealand, the industry is in rude health too, with a depth that Australia is yet to match.

There can be little doubt this is a golden age for beer, possibly unrivalled in its millennia-long history. Little wonder that multi-national businesses are taking note, whether looking to develop their own "craft" labels or

snapping up breweries. This year saw Lion make the long-expected move to take 100 per cent control of Little World Beverages, owner of Little Creatures. As a counterpoint, the founders of Byron Bay's Stone & Wood, whose Pacific Ale has become Australia's new craft beer darling, later bought back the 20 per cent of their business that had been owned by Little World Beverages from Lion. Meanwhile, Coopers announced it would release regular seasonals under the Thomas Cooper's Selection banner.

Slowly but surely, restaurants began treating their beer lists with similar respect to their wine lists. Many new smaller venues make it a central part of their appeal; the smarter operators at the top end of the food chain have woken up too.

The beer festival calendar has become one that now requires careful negotiation. Long-running successes such as the Australian Hotel's bash in The Rocks, Sydney, and the Tasmanian International Beer Fest have been joined by the likes of the Ballarat Beer Festival. These are all family-friendly affairs combining beer, food and music – and attracting thousands.

Good Beer Week grew into a huge affair in its second outing in Melbourne, bringing brewers and beer lovers from across Australia and overseas together at more than 100 events. At the start of that week, the Great Australasian Beer Spectacular attracted almost 11,000 to the city's Royal Exhibition

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Building to sample 58 never-before-seen beers. Elsewhere, beer weeks in Western Australia, Newcastle and Sydney expanded their offerings and Queensland Beer Week was born.

As for the beers, 2012 saw many brewers exploring new avenues, sometimes in collaboration with their peers. At different times, it seemed every new beer was a Belgian-inspired farmhouse ale, a black IPA, an imperial stout or a red ale. At the extremes, brewers experimented with barrel-aging, unusual ingredients and wild yeasts.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the colourful nature of today's Australian beer industry is to look at the beers themselves. With such rapid expansion and many appearing in tiny batches that soon disappeared, there were many I never sampled. But of those I did, I have compiled a list of 50 that follows that left a lasting impression on me. ➔





TOP 50 Aussie Beers

This is not a top 50 as such – instead a collection of beers that dazzle, break new ground, are part of emerging trends, or simply classics. As a snapshot of Australian beer today, it makes for exciting reading. What’s more, I’d be happy with any of these in my glass any day of the week. They hopefully provide some new ideas to seek out while the sun is shining.

BEERS OF THE YEAR



NAIL BREWING CLOUT STOUT
Can a beer be worth \$70 a bottle? In this case, without a doubt, especially when paired with a chunk of Stilton. Incredible. / 10.79% alc.

FERAL HOP HOG
Collects trophies like they’re going out of fashion. Huge flavours and aromas, yet with more balance than Philippe Petit. / 5.8% alc.

TEMPLE MIDNIGHT IPA
One of many black IPAs in this list and possibly the best. Massive hops. Black as night. Smooth as hell. / 7.5% alc.

MOUNTAIN GOAT / MIKKELLER GYPSY & THE GOAT
A black pepperberry IPA brewed with Danish superstar Mikkel Borg Bjergsø that was as brilliant as it was unique. / 7.3% alc.

STONE & WOOD PACIFIC ALE
The whole country can’t be wrong. The Byron Bay brewers can’t buy tanks quick enough for this wonderful, tropical quaffer. / 4.4% alc.

OLD FAITHFULS



LITTLE CREATURES PALE ALE
“I should stop trying other beers and just drink this all the time; I love it so much,” says the wife. Many share her sentiments. / 5.2% alc.

KNAPPSTEIN RESERVE LAGER
The only beer from Clare’s Knappstein makes great use of NZ’s tropical Nelson Sauvignon hops. / 5.6% alc.

MATILDA BAY ALPHA PALE ALE
The powers-that-be push stablemate Fat Yak, but those in the know drink Matilda Bay’s genuine US style pale ale. / 5.2% alc.

COOPERS BEST EXTRA STOUT
Simply an excellent stout with real depth that often appears Messiah-like to save me from despair in Australia’s beer deserts. / 6.3% alc.

JAMES SQUIRE JACK OF SPADES PORTER
Behind the rebranding, this remains a fine, perfectly balanced example of the style. / 5.0% alc.

MINE’S A PINT



4 PINES STOUT
A beautifully balanced stout, with layers of chocolate and coffee to savour. / 5.1% alc.

MOUNTAIN GOAT HIGHTAIL
A beer that when enjoyed fresh from the tap is standing the test of time 15 years after its birth. / 5.1% alc.

HARGREAVES HILL EXTRA SPECIAL BITTER
This New World take on the English style is well established as a Victorian craft beer classic / 5.4% alc.

MOO BREW DARK ALE
Moo Brew specialises in tight, balanced beers, with this subtly complex ale a great introduction to darker beers. / 5.0% alc.

TWO BIRDS SUNSET ALE
Beer two from Two Birds is a rounded red ale with prominent tropical aromas / 4.6% alc.

SUMMER REFRESHERS



MURRAY’S PUNCH & JUDY
A superb take on English-style session ales with a hoppy Kiwi twist. / 3.9% alc.

COWARAMUP PILSENER
You’ll have to travel to sample this trophy-winning Margaret River Pilsener, but its brewer Jeremy Good will make your trip worthwhile. / 5.0% alc.

ILLAWARRA KOELSCH
The new brew team at Illawarra announced themselves with a flurry of medals and now can’t brew enough Koelsch to satisfy punters. / 5.1% alc.

FERAL WHITE
Feral’s original beer is hitting new heights since production was moved to its new brewery. / 4.6% alc.

KOOINDA KARAKA BELGIAN WITBIER
Obscure hybrid fruit, the karakaberry, adds a hint of berries to this tart refresher from the former backyard brewers. / 5.5% alc.

HOP BOMBS



BRIGHT BREWERY MIA IPA
One of a handful of beers that has shown Bright’s new(ish) head brewer Jon Seltin as one to watch. / 6.9% alc.

KOOINDA BLACK IPA
A fierce black IPA, but in a good way. Heaps of Nelson Sauvignon hops are just about held in check in a riotous hoppy rampage. / 7.0% alc.

MURRAY’S ICON 2IPA
An elder statesman of the Australian double IPA scene and still one of the country’s best beers. / 7.5% alc.

BURLEIGH BREWING FIGJAM IPA
Released one week, wins gold medal in the US the next. Layer upon layer of hop flavours, solid bitterness and clean as a whistle. / 7.0% alc.

MORNINGTON PENINSULA BREWERY IMPERIAL IPA
A full-bore, niceties-be-damned beast from a brewery that’s won a horde of fans in its two years. / 8.5% alc.

BIG, DARK BEASTS



HARGREAVES HILL RUSSIAN IMPERIAL STOUT
A souped-up variant of Hargreaves’ excellent stout that deserves sipping and savouring with friends (and cheese). / 11.8% alc.

MURRAY’S HEART OF DARKNESS
The prolific Novocastrians have a range of imperial stouts to suit all tastes. This (and its short-lived oak-aged version) is my pick every time. / 9.6% alc.

RED HILL IMPERIAL STOUT
A Victorian craft beer classic that was back on form in 2012 with a complexity that was amiss last year. / 8.0% alc.

HOLGATE EMPRESS
An even more luxuriant take on their already luscious Temptation and now available relatively widely in 500ml bottles. / 10.0% alc.

BACCHUS BREWING RUM BARREL-AGED BALTIC PORTER
This idiosyncratic QLD brewery knocks out around 100 unique beers a year. This whopper turned heads at Melbourne’s Good Beer Week. / 12.4% alc.

BELGIAN BEAUTIES



BRIDGE ROAD SAISON

The original Saison from saison-obsessed Ben Kraus remains a cracking Aussie take on the style. / 6.0% alc.

RED HILL TEMPTATION

This annual release from the Mornington Peninsula brewers is delicate and packed with fruity, spicy characters. Dangerously drinkable. / 8.0% alc.

MAD ABBOT TRIPEL

Talking of dangerously drinkable... My favourite of the Port Macquarie brewery's beers, it's a fine Aussie take on the Tripel style. / 9.5% alc.

MURRAY'S PUNK MONK

Punk by name, elegant by nature. This irregular release is my favourite of Murray's many excellent Belgian-style beers. / 7.0% alc.

LOBETHAL DEVIL'S CHOICE

Big, bold and complex, this fruity, spicy strong golden ale is well worth hunting down when released annually. / 10% alc.

COLLABORATION CRAZY



BRIDGE ROAD BREWERS / MIKKELLER DARK HARVEST

Mikkeller's second Aussie collaboration and second black IPA was a rich, smooth, hoppy choc-orange delight. / 6.6% alc.

TEMPLE BREWERY & BRASSERIE / WEIHENSTEPHAN UNIFIKATOR

A coup for Melbourne's Temple, this was only the second collaboration by the world's oldest brewery. They met the challenge with a rich weizenbock (strong wheat beer) of real depth and quality. / 7% alc.

BRIDGE ROAD BREWERS / NØGNE Ø INDIA SAISON

Initially a one-off Aussie / Norwegian affair, this clash of styles is so good both brewers continue to brew it on other sides of the world. / 7.5% alc.

MOON DOG / YEASTIE BOYS PETER PIPER'S PICKLED PEPPER PURPLE PEATED PALE ALE AKA 7PS

Australia's oddest joined forces with NZ's weirdest and threw everything from chilli peppers to peated malt at a beer that somehow worked. / 9% alc.

NINKASI'S ANGEL

The first release from the Women of Beer, a group of female brewers and beer industry types, was a highly spiced Belgian Tripel. Their second beer, a farmhouse style bière de garde, is out now. / 7.8% alc.

FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT



MOUNTAIN GOAT / SEVEN SEEDS SEEDY GOAT COFFEE IPA

Most brewers use coffee to add roast character to a dark beer. This uses green beans' perfume to complement the hop bitterness. / 6.2% alc.

SEVEN SHEDS BASS STRAIT IPA

An IPA made with a hop variety only grown at Seven Sheds that spent weeks traversing the Bass Strait in whisky casks on the Spirit of Tasmania to recreate the style's original journey from British Empire days. Oaky, smoky, slightly tart and utterly unique. / 6.4% alc.

DR'S ORDERS PLASMA WHITE IPA

NSW-based Doc brews rarely, and rare styles, with this strong white ale / IPA hybrid being one of his best. / 7.6% alc.

BURLEIGH BLACK GIRAFFE

The return of Burleigh's coffee lager featured a new bean, a richer body and even more rewards than 2010's highly rated predecessor. / 5.0% alc.

RED DUCK RA #2

A beer with no hops, a yeast cultured from sourdough bread, and lots of fruits and spices inspired by beers from centuries ago. Like a spiced, tart breakfast juice, yet strong as a wine. / 12.6% alc.

BRING DA FUNK



FERAL WATERMELON WARHEAD

Inspired by the kids' candy, this full-flavoured, citrusy, tart beer caught the imagination of many at the Great Australasian Beer Spectacular and is now brewed regularly. / 2.9% alc.

LA SIRENE SAISON

The first beer from two farmhouse style obsessives is as good a saison as you'll find in Australia. / 6.5% alc.

TEMPLE SAISON DE MIEL

Aussie beer lovers rejoiced at Temple's return last December, partly because it meant the return of their much-loved Saison. This bigger, honeyed version was better still. / 8.0% alc.

MOON DOG PERVERSE SEXUAL AMALGAM

How to let the world know you're different in one fell swoop: make your first release a distinctly tart, barrel-aged ale with cherries. It set out Moon Dog's 'Love us or hate us' stance overnight. / 6.9% alc.

RED DUCK GRUITER

Although not as weird as predecessor Canute The Gruit, this Medieval-style ale from Ballarat's Mad Professor counted puckering sourness among its many characteristics. / 6.8% alc.

NOTE: Many of these are only available through specialist bottle shops, online retailers or the breweries direct; some may be seasonal, draught-only or sold out releases.

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