



Mark Hollett, Blackwood
Valley Brewing Company

brew a glass darkly

Think 'winter beers' and your mind will probably make the giant leap from crisp, refreshing lagers to big, heavy, impenetrably dark ales.

Anthony Williams

A SHIFT TO WINTER DRINKING needs not be so white and black. Think the autumnal/wintery colours of gold, orange, ruby, copper and brown – and a range of enticing aromas and flavours creating a spectrum between the pale lager and the jet-black stout. Read on as we explore the many brews that can provide the sort of warmth and comfort we instinctively crave at this time of year.

For the uninitiated, or anyone who's been frightened off by a stout in the past, the German Dark Lager – or Dunkel – style is an ideal place to start. These copper-to-dark-brown beers traditionally balance delicious malt aromas and flavours – think bread, nuts, chocolate and caramel – with the sort of clean, crisp and refreshing characters you'd expect from a paler lager. Craft-brewers at the Duckstein, Last Drop, Matso's and Mash breweries are regularly creating their own interpretations of the dunkel, with Duckstein head brewer Paul Gasmier describing the style as one that "really comes to the fore in winter, when we all like our creature comforts".

Gasmier's craft-brewed Duckstein Dunkel picked up a silver medal at this year's Australian International Beer Awards, while

Last Drop master brewer Jan Bruckner brought home a gold for his darker, nitrogenated take on the dark lager style. Matso's Broome Brewery and Elmar's In The Valley also received bronze medals for their dark-lager brews (the bottled Smokey Bishop and seasonal Schwartz Beer respectively), although Elmar's brewer Brad Harris has since replaced that beer with a 'dangerously drinkable' Bock lager for the winter months.

Typically stronger but not necessarily darker than the Dunkels, the Bock beer styles also have their origins in Germany's proud brewing history. A range of colour-coordinated brews are collected under the bock banner – from the golden-coloured Helles Bock to the much darker Doppelbock – but noticeably higher alcohol levels (usually 6–8% abv), richer malt characters, and a smoothness of flavour that comes from extended cold storage (or 'lagering'), are common trademarks of the bock styles.

Paul Gasmier will be adding a seasonal doppelbock to the Duckstein taps this winter, and you'll also find a silver-medal-winning version of the style – formidably known as the Debilitator – amongst the Ironbark Brewery's

extended stable of beers. Add the Elmar's seasonal Bock to the mix, and the Swan Valley offers a trifecta of winter-oriented lager treats; as well as some of the boldest dark ales you'll find anywhere (more on that later).

Moving from lagers to ales, it's perhaps worth remembering that many of Britain's classic ales were developed in a climate that, at its best, is not too dissimilar to a West Australian winter. These brews – including the Extra Special Bitter, Pale, Amber, Brown and Scottish Ale styles – boast the sort of malt characters, fruity esters and body that have particular appeal during our cooler months, with the Old Brewery's Mounts Bay Brown Ale and Cowaramup Brewing's Special Pale Ale both picking up silver medals at the 2009 Australian International Beer Awards. Little Creatures have also received plenty of plaudits for the thoroughly modern, American-hopped take on the Amber Ale that is Rogers' Beer, while relative newcomers the Old Coast Road Brewery have stuck with British tradition to create the full-flavoured Harris Bitter Ale.

The India Pale Ale (or IPA) is a style that's also worth your attention during the winter

months, a beer that was originally developed to survive long ocean voyages to India during the time of the British Empire. High levels of hop bitterness have always been a trademark characteristic of these brews (with hops being used for their preservative qualities), but, unlike the American-style Pale Ales – and IPA's – that have found favour in recent years, malt sweetness and body played a more pronounced role in the beer's seductive and wonderfully complex flavour profile.

That combination of hop and malt characters can still be found in the British-style IPA's produced by local craft-brewers at the Gage Roads, Colonial, Cowaramup and Sail & Anchor breweries. The Sail's IPA has been an award-winning favourite at the iconic pub brewery for many years now, and current head brewer Fiona Geraty is keeping the regulars happy with a beer that integrates three different malts and four hop varieties, and picked up a silver medal – alongside Cowaramup Brewing Company's IPA – at this year's Australian International Beer Awards.

Just in time for Fremantle's coolest months, Geraty has also created her own interpretation of a beer style that has risen from the ashes in the wake of craft-brewing's resurgence – the Porter. This was a beer that, after lubricating the gears, and thirsts, of the Industrial Revolution and ushering in mass-production brewing in the UK, was made redundant early in the 20th Century by its stylistic big brothers – the Robust or Stout Porters that would become known simply as Stouts. Thankfully, craft-brewers have resurrected and reinterpreted the style as a rich, dark but very approachable winter brew.

"The Porter is an English-style [dark ale], but the body is a lot lighter," says Fiona Geraty, comparing her seasonal brew – christened 'Xocoatl' – with the Sail & Anchor's trademark winter-warmer, the Brass Monkey Stout. "You're going to get that warming effect from the darker malts [and] you're going to get a lot of chocolate notes out of it, and a bit of coffee as well; but just [in] a much lighter style."

Porter's relative lightness is accompanied by a malt profile that restrains the burnt, roasted, espresso-and-licorice bite that's often a challenge in stouts. Instead, chocolate, caramel, toffee, bread and nutty characters are much more typical of the style; resulting in a brew that Colonial Brewing Company's Richard Moroney describes as "the Barry White of beers; smooth, chocolate-y and kinda sexy". Be seduced this winter by the porters of Colonial, Billabong Brewing, Jarrah Jack's, the Old Coast Road Brewery and Mad Monk, or drop into the Sail & Anchor and conduct your own porter and stout taste-test.

Of course, what most people know about stouts is actually what they know about a certain, ubiquitous Irish 'export' (brewed under licence here in Australia). Craft-brewed stouts such as the Brass Monkey offer a complexity of flavour that you might struggle to find in a mass-produced product, and two of Australia's most awarded stout beers – Nail Stout and Blackwood Stout, both brewed right here in WA – are testimony to that.

Nail Stout was adjudged Best WA Beer at the 2008 Perth Royal Beer Show and picked up a silver medal at this year's Australian International Beer Awards (alongside Cowaramup Brewing's stout). The Blackwood Stout, on the other hand, received a gold medal at the Perth show in 2008 – after taking out the Best WA Beer trophy in that competition the previous year – and was awarded the Champion Stout trophy by the 2009 AIBA judges. Both stouts are different, both have limited availability, and both are well worth seeking out – with Nail brewer John Stallwood using six different malts, rolled oats and Kent Goldings hops to create his first-class oatmeal stout, and Mark Hollett producing a world-beating sweet stout at the helm of Bridgetown's Blackwood Valley Brewing Company.

"I think we're probably the smallest commercial brewery in the country, but we see our beers as something special [that] people can only find in Bridgetown," he explains. "Blackwood Stout is brewed as a



sweet stout and, in my opinion, the key is [getting] the right balance between roasted grains and sweetness ... [Our brew] has a full, smooth body with a thick, creamy, cappuccino-style head, and it's the beer I always save till last. I think of sweet stout as a dessert ale."

If you're still peckish after dessert, or ready to totally commit to the dark side, all roads lead to the big winner at this year's Australian International Beer Awards – the Swan Valley's Feral Brewing Company. Just in time for the winter months, the 2009 Champion Exhibitor and Champion Small Brewery has unleashed a Russian Imperial Stout lovingly referred to as 'Boris'; a big beer (10.8% abv) that was made with the sort of hand-crafted attention to detail that has put the Feral brewing team ahead of the pack. Think four times the usual amount of grain in the mash; think an infusion of chocolate characters from fermented cocoa beans; and also think their Champion Barley Wine trophy winner – the beast known as 'Razorback' (11.5% abv).

What are you waiting for this winter?

With champagne yeast involved and a gold lacing in the glass, the Razorback is a regal beast to behold.

Winter Beer Recommendations

Last Drop Dark (4.5% abv)

The Last Drop Brewery

This brew's deep, dark-brown colour and creamy, nitrogen-infused head suggests a stouter challenge, but its clean, crisp flavours confirm a dark-lager heart. A pronounced nuttiness is complemented by chocolate and espresso notes on the nose and palate, while a dry finish and mild bitterness adds excellent drinkability.

Bock Bier (6.2% abv)

Elmar's In The Valley

The 'winter warmer' strength of this very approachable, vibrant gold lager might well sneak up on the unsuspecting punter. Extended 'lagering' has resulted in a brew that's smooth, clean and malt-driven, while also boasting an alcohol sweetness that's slowly revealed in a moreish, progressively warming finish.

Harris Bitter Ale (3.7% abv)

Old Coast Road Brewery

Assertive bitterness is present and correct, but it's this gold-amber brew's golden-syrup, toasty and biscuity malt characters that make it such a cool-weather treat. Transatlantic hop notes – British earthiness and American citrus tang – only add to the appeal, with brewer Andrew Harris justifiably proud of this first-class ale.

Also try: PBH Strong Porter Ale

India Pale Ale (5.2% abv)

Sail & Anchor Pub Brewery

This amber-gold brew has a strength of character that's introduced by a seductive blend of sweet, toasty malt and citrus hop aromas. Caramel-toffee sweetness arrives first on the palate, followed by fruity, earthy, UK-hop flavours, moderate bitterness and

a piney, US-hop note in the long, lingering finish. A deliciously complex winter warmer.

Also try: Brass Monkey Stout & 'Xocoatl' Porter

Mounts Bay Brown Ale (5.0% abv)

The Old Brewery

This Northern English-style brown ale – with its nutty, caramel and toasty malt characters – is an ideal session beer for the winter months. It's also an ideal match for a slab of prime beef (see The Old Brewery menu), and picked up a silver medal in an ideal first year at the Australian International Beer Awards.

Blackwood Stout (5.2% abv)

Blackwood Valley Brewing Company

Champion Stout at this year's Australian International Beer Awards, this full-bodied brew pours a solid black with a creamy, cappuccino head. Its choc-chip cookie and coffee aromas certainly stir the senses, but it's a palate-dazzling balance of malty sweetness and roasted, coffee-chocolate characters that's the real, trophy-winning treat here. A sublime sweet stout.

Also try: Blackwood's Irish Red & Dark Scottish Export Ales

Nail Stout (6% abv)

Nail Brewing Australia

An aroma of chocolate mousse is first to emerge from this wonderfully complex, brown-black stout. The presence of six different malts ensures an evolution of malt characters from that point on (from Belgian chocolate and espresso, to nuts and licorice), with rolled oats and Kent Goldings hops contributing to body, bitterness and the brew's multi-award-winning class.

Razorback Barley Wine (11.5% abv)

Feral Brewing Company

This Feral monster pours a lovely ruby-amber and offers little indication of its potency throughout. There are toffee, vinous and

sherry aromatics on the nose, and rich toffee and dried fruit characters on the palate; but there's also a beautiful sense of balance and elegant drinkability that's rarely found in beers this strong. With champagne yeast involved and a gold lacing in the glass, the Razorback is a regal beast to behold.

Also try: 'Boris' Russian Imperial Stout & Rust (Belgian-style Dubbel) ☀

Note: Give these beers a chance to warm up from what are usually-too-cold serving temperatures and you'll be giving their complex malt and hop characters an opportunity to really open up. Use your hands to cup and warm the beer, and swirl the glass to release the aromatics. Also, support WA Craft-brewing during WA Beer Week (June 6 – 14). Enjoy!

