



February 2013

After a few months of tasting barrel-aged this, funky-sour that, and 10%-ABV what's-it-called, we're toning it down this month and turning the clocks back to evaluate that old stand-by, the granddaddy of craft beer: the American pale ale. Stand-by it may be, but American pale ale -- APA, for short -- has in no way been immune to innovation.

This month, we taste Mad River's Steelhead Extra Pale Ale and Knee Deep's Citra Extra Pale Ale, two very different American pale ales that exemplify two different attitudes toward hops. They both bear the label Extra Pale Ale, which hints at the fact that each has more alcohol than a typical pale ale. In the '80s, Steelhead was comparing itself to England's typical 4-5%-ABV pale ales; Knee Deep's Citra is a more contemporary "extra," richer than APAs' typical 5-6% ABV.

No other element of American craft beer has created so much acclaim, fealty, and critique as the hop. And judging from the media ink, sales statistics, and total number of minutes-waited-in-line for an annual taste of Pliny the Younger, the hop's noblest beer canvas is the pale ale family. So let's raise a couple glasses of two pale ales brewed in California, both delicious snapshots of the style, bookending a quarter century of craft beer evolution.

Cheers!

Rich Higgins, Master Cicerone

Copyright Rich Higgins, 2013.

American pale ales are brewed with American hops. Back in the 1970s and '80s, despite craft brewers still having a foot firmly in English brewing tradition, this was a move of necessity -- American brewers had trouble getting their hands on English hops. These American hops were full of bright, bold flavor and floral aroma, and imbued beers with flavors of grapefruit and pine, as opposed to the earthy, savory, almost cheesy (in a good way) flavors of English hops. The hops were transplants from Europe originally, but grown in the soil and climate of New York, California, Oregon, or Washington, they boasted bold new flavors and aromas.

American microbrewers and consumers became so enamored with these hops that they began to brew beers that relied on more and more on hops, skewing the traditional English sense of malt-hop balance toward ever higher bitterness levels and aromatics from the hops. Listing the number of pounds of hops per barrel of beer became a selling point. While there's a limit to how much bitterness you can extract per amount of hops, there's no limit to how much floral, fruity hop aroma you can get from adding more and more hops to a beer during the late stages of the boil (called "late kettle additions"), during fermentation and aging (called "dry hopping"), during the whirlpool, the mash, and even through hot liquor hopping (essentially brewing with a hop tea rather than with water). Also, without regulatory disincentive against strong beer, pale ale in the US also had more malt and alcohol in it, creating a richer, headier beer, and one that can support more hoppiness. (British brewers are subject to a "beer duty" that taxes the amount of alcohol a beer contains; Uncle Sam taxes brewers based on overall beer volume produced, regardless of alcohol content.) Thus, by the end of the 1980s, semantically and philosophically, pale ale had been split in two: English pale ale and American pale ale.

The American chapter of pale ale begins with malty, medium-bodied pale ales of the 1970s and '80s and continues to this day, with a new generation of brewers and ingredient purveyors continuing to innovate. Nowadays, contemporary pale ales are less defined by their malts and balance than they once were; they're now defined even more by their hops' bitterness and bouquet, accompanied by a dry maltiness that's kept much more in the background than it used to be. Americans' love affair with hops has led to the India Pale Ale's usurpation of the Pale Ale. As more IPAs are brewed than pale ales, the modern pale ale has sometimes become more of a "light IPA" than the malty-hoppy balance of the past. Fueling this delicious fire is the hop industry -- a collection of farmers, university researchers, and brokers -- that are hybridizing and testing new hops constantly. The palette of American hops has expanded beyond the grapefruit, orange, pine, cannabis, and cat pee (seriously) flavors and aromas of the '80s and '90s, and has added lemon, pineapple, mango, guava, passion fruit, and mint into the mix through breeding and selection for specific essential oils. APAs, IPAs, DIPAs, Black IPAs, and all the other PA acronyms



brewers churn out today are driven by a quest to capture every bit of the amazing, floral, fruity essence of classic and new American hops.

Steelhead Extra Pale Ale

Mad River Brewing Company, Blue Lake, California, USA

Copyright Rich Higgins, 2013.

5.6% ABV \$/12 oz

Hailing from Mad River Brewing Co. in Humboldt County is the classic Steelhead Extra Pale Ale. You've seen it on store shelves before. Maybe you love it. Maybe you loved it once, but you've moved on. Well, Steelhead hasn't moved on, and it shouldn't. I'm not the only one who thinks it's perfect as is -- it won a gold medal last October at the Great American Beer Festival, beating 66 other entries in the "Golden or Blonde Ale" Category. The style guidelines and palate for APAs have skewed bolder since Mad River Brewing was founded in 1989 (the first brew of Steelhead EPA was in 1990), which is why Steelhead might fit better as a golden ale these days. The beer is hopped with Cascade hops for a classic grapefruit, piney nose and flavor. It's not as bitter or as caramelized as Sierra Nevada Pale Ale, the benchmark APA. However, the style is broader than Sierra's Pale, and Steelhead Extra Pale has the hallmark flavor and balance of a classic pale ale: a smooth, malty body, American hops, and ABV in the mid-5s. It's fermented with English ale yeast, which produces apple-like esters and doesn't ferment all the malt sugars, leaving a little residual sweetness behind. That ale yeast is another nod to the early days of craft brewing -- before the wide availability of specialty yeasts that ferment everything from saisons to Bavarian weissbiers, American craft brewers' choices were either the softly fruity English ale yeast or the neutral-tasting, more-highly-attenuating American ale yeast (now known in the industry as "Chico" -- I'll leave you to guess which brewery popularized that strain).

Steelhead Extra Pale shines slightly hazy and golden in the glass, laced with a thin white head. The malts, ale yeast, and hops are all in evidence from the very beginning as scents of bread and malt, apple and pear, and hints of citrus, pine, and flowers waft to your nose. The palate is a balance of malt and hops: a jab of bitterness parried by a brush of maltiness, a flash of bright citrus honey slathered atop biscuits, a dollop of applesauce garnished with grassy herbs and bitter orange peel. The finish is off-dry, with a sparkle of carbonation cutting through the gentle residual sweetness, leaving bitterness on the back of the tongue and a breath of savory malts. It's a toast to beer's balanced past and bright future.

Citra Extra Pale Ale

Knee Deep Brewing Company, Lincoln, California, USA

7.0% ABV \$/22 oz

Brewer Jeremy Warren opened Knee Deep as a contract brewery in 2010, but since mid-2011 has brewed out of his own facility near Sacramento (the old Beerman's Brewery). The majority of his beers are masterful, West-Coast-Style hop bombs -- bitter, aromatic, nuanced, and dangerously easy to drink. For his pale ale, he features just one hop and uses it throughout the brew and fermentation in order to show off all of its nuance and virtue. He chose the Citra hop, a cultivar released in 2009 whose clean, citrusy, tropical notes have made it very popular in just a few years. Embracing the West Coast Style, Citra EPA is incredibly aromatic, with a lean maltiness, and high but hidden alcohol. It's sort of between a pale and an IPA. Its 7% ABV is quite high for a pale ale, but its 45 bitterness units are at the low end of the IPA range; its body is so lean and finish so dry and smooth that it seems to think of itself more as a strong pale ale.

In the glass, Citra Extra Pale builds an eager, white head atop the deep golden beer. Smelling it, you're immediately greeted with freshly cut grass, grapefruit, and hints of guava and chopped scallions. Neither the beer's malt nor its yeast imparts much character to the bouquet, as if to pay respect to the hops. Even on the palate, the malt adds only a bit of honey graham cracker to the hops' symphony of flora: high notes of lemon and grapefruit are accompanied by tropical fruit muskiness; chives, mint, and tarragon lilt among apricot-pit-like tannins; while a steely bitterness provides a continuing bass. The beer's 7% abv is belied by its lean body and low residual sugar. With suggestions of resin, tannins, and acidity, the beer finishes smartly, and a lingering bitterness begs to be quenched by another sip.