

Gateway is usually a bad term.



words and photos: Dan Osborn

# GATEWAY BEER STYLES

STEP THROUGH THE DOOR TO GOOD BEER

**T**he King of Beers. The coldest tasting beer in the world. Tastes great, less filling. It doesn't get any better than this. To millions of beer drinkers, these phrases advertise their beer profile of choice. Light tasting beers are by far the most popular beers in the world. Many of us who like other kinds of beer find this perennially perplexing, but there is no disputing that light beers are king.

What do we beer geeks do with friends and family who reach for the "triple hops brewed" beers instead of the ones with the real flavor of triple hops? Do we ridicule them as we sip our 9 percent imperial stout, a drink they might spit out when sipping for the first time? Or do we take a more benevolent approach and meet them on their turf? Better: We can make helpful suggestions about styles and beers they might consider trying; beers more in line with their taste buds.

You might be a craft beer ambassador, or you might prefer such lighter beers yourself. Either way, here are four gateway styles that should be enjoyable by anyone's standards.

## CLOUDY AND WHITE: BELGIAN WITBIER

The tremendous rise in popularity of Coors-owned Blue Moon should be a pleasant surprise to most beer aficionados. It is a surprise because witbier is not very similar to the type of beer that many Blue Moon drinkers might be used to quaffing. That's pleasing; it means more people are open to trying beer beyond macro lager.

Blue Moon is a fair example of Belgian witbier, a historic style that has been around for hundreds of years, but also one that nearly died out. Pierre Celis is famous for reviving the style in the 1960s by starting to brew what would become Hoegaarden, the modern flagship witbier (now owned and brewed by Anheuser-Busch InBev).

Witbier, or "white beer," gets its name from its hazy,

whitish-yellow appearance, a result of suspended yeast and the wheat used in brewing. It has a characteristic citrus quality from bitter orange peel and coriander adds peppery spice notes. It is a refreshing taste that, though perhaps strange at first, is refreshing on a warm summer day. If you like the spicy, yeasty zest of witbier, try the saison style as well.

**COMMERCIAL EXAMPLES:**

- Hoegaarden Original White,
- Celis White, Wittekerke,
- Blue Moon Belgian White,
- Ommegang Witte, Allagash White,
- Bell's Winter White Ale, New Belgium Mothership Wit, Jolly Pumpkin Calabaza Blanca,
- Matt Brewing Saranac Belgian White, Summit Scandia, etc.



We are a gateway magazine.

## BABY STEPS FOR THE MACRO DRINKER

**M**any of us hesitate to try something new because of the risk involved. Maybe we don't want to spend money, or commit ourselves to an entire glass of something we might not like. Here are some suggestions for low-risk ways to try new beers: Have a tasting party and tell each guest to bring a different six pack. You could even keep it to a couple styles, like have everyone bring a good example of pilsner.

Ask for a sample of draft beer at certain bars. Especially if you have tipped previously, they're usually willing to pour one. A couple ounces are enough to help you decide if you want more. Ask one of your beer geek friends for some no-fail suggestions. He or she might even be willing to have you over to share a few beers. Beer geeks spend a lot of time and money reading about and tasting all kinds of beer. Use their knowledge!

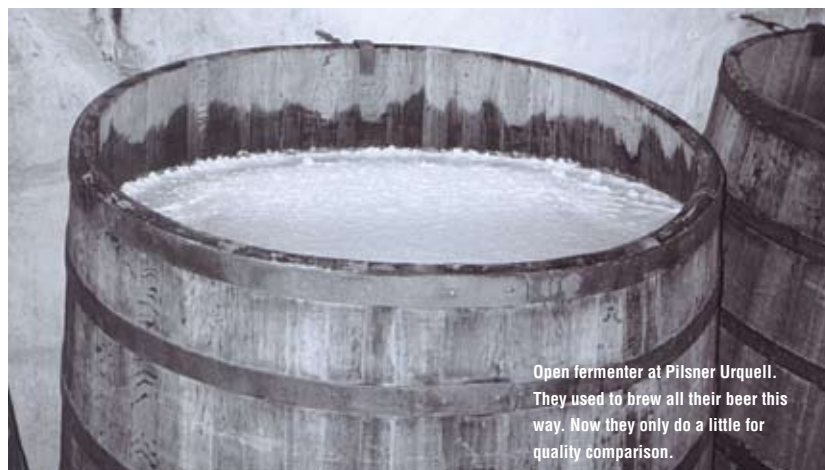
Find some homebrewers! Not only do they love to talk about and share beer, they make every beer style known to man, and many that aren't. They are (mostly) always willing to share. Attend a beer festival. There are dozens (or hundreds) of beers for sampling, often with one entry fee.



## THE WORLD'S FIRST GOLDEN BEER: PILSNER



Original Pilsner next to homebrewed clone.



Open fermenter at Pilsner Urquell. They used to brew all their beer this way. Now they only do a little for quality comparison.

In 1842 beer was indubitably changed. Before that, the malting process ensured that the malt, and therefore beer, would be amber or dark in color. Advances in malting allowed crafty Czech Republic Pilsen brewers to keep malt lighter in color. When this unique malt was combined with soft water and spicy hops, and fermented with lager yeast, the result was a beverage made in heaven. It was so well received that it eventually became the world's most imitated beer style.

"Imitation" is an important word here, because what most people know as beer is only a shadow of the true pilsner. It makes perfect sense that one of the best gateway beers is a proper example of a style you already know. Light-beer drinkers are used to imitations of pilsner—why not try the real thing? A pilsner should be light in color, but still have a nice golden hue. It is very clear and will have good carbonation. Unlike the watered-down versions lightened in body by the use of rice and corn, a pilsner's wonderfully clean malt flavor should be supported by a firm bitterness. Give Pilsner Urquell (the original, and still quite tasty) or Victory Prima Pils a try to see what beer should taste like.

**COMMERCIAL EXAMPLES:**

Pilsner Urquell, Lagunitas Pils, Warsteiner Premium, Golden Pheasant, Bitburger Premium Pils, Oskar Blues Mama's Little Yella Pils, Victory Prima Pils, Summit Pilsener, Troegs Sunshine Pils, Brooklyn Pilsner, Stoudt's Pils, New Belgium Blue Paddle Pils, Trumer Pils, etc.

*Note: For the purpose of this article we are using "pilsner" to include both Czech and German style pilsners, which admittedly have their differences.*

## TASTY AS HELLES

"Helles" is German for "light-colored," "bright," or "pale." It was used in contrast to the more common Dunkelbier, or dark beer. Helles should appear medium yellow to pale gold and be very clear. If you order ein masse in a Munich biergarten, you will most likely be quaffing this liquid gold. While Helles was gaining popularity in Munich in the early 20th Century, beer drinkers in the Unites States were facing an increasingly real threat of prohibition. If US brewers had wanted to start brewing this style, it would have been against the law. This could be part of the reason why Helles did not catch on as much as pilsner, which came earlier and had already captured the tastes of beer drinkers everywhere.

Unlike the hoppier pilsner, Helles is a showcase for the malt. Lager yeasts typically do not impart a lot of yeast flavor, and this allows the hop and malt flavors to shine. Helles is a tricky style to make because there is nowhere to hide off flavors. A properly made Helles will have a malty presence with low to moderately-low hop bitterness. It will finish clean and be an easy drinking, delicious beer.

**COMMERCIAL EXAMPLES:**

Weihenstephaner Original, Spaten Munchner Hell, Hacker-Pschorr Münchner Gold, Victory Lager, Stoudt's Gold Lager, Pennsylvania Brewing Penn Gold, Three Floyds Gorch Fock, Surly Brewing Hell, Capital Brewery Bavarian Lager, Matt Brewing Saranac Helles, etc.

Liter of Helles in Munich, Germany, 2003.



## TASTINGS:



**Hoegaarden (Witbier):** Hazy beer with whitish tint. Aroma smells of yeast, coriander, pepper. Taste is sweet with spicy in the middle, finishing dry.



**Golden Pheasant (Pilsner):** Spicy Czech hops in the aroma with light, fleeting skunkiness. Taste is bitter and clean. Light sweetness balanced by pronounced but soft bitterness. A tasty Czech-style pils.

**Spaten Premium & Hacker-Pschorr Munich Gold (Helles):** Both Light golden color and brilliantly clear. Clean taste, sweet bready malt, with just enough hops for balance. Smooth taste that finishes clean. The Hacker-Pschorr had a touch more bitterness than the Spaten.



**Reissdorf Kölsch:** Such a clean beer with medium hop bitterness. Finishes crisp, sparkling, it provokes the next sip. A lager-esque ale that is very quaffable.



## THE GOLD-FERMENTED ALE: KÖLSCH

Strictly speaking you have to travel to Cologne, Germany, to drink Kölsch. The name is reserved for only a certain number of breweries in and around the city. Many breweries in town serve this elixir in standard 0.2L tall, narrow glasses called a Stange. Not only is this a comfortable glass to hold, but it also lets you see the beautiful gold color and clarity of the beer.

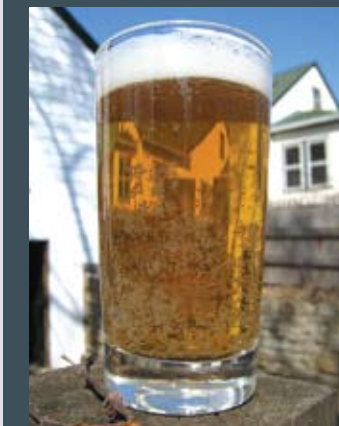
Before World War II, Cologne had over 40 breweries, but after the dust settled only two remained. This was in large part due to the war but also because lager beer continued to increase in popularity and the demand for Kölsch had waned . By

the 1960s, though, Kölsch became the beer of Cologne, and has retained a firm position ever since with 14 breweries in operation today. Some of those brewers export to the United States and that means we can try both German and American versions of the style.

Kölsch is considered a hybrid beer (like Altbier and California Common) because it is made with an ale yeast but fermented at cooler-than-normal temperatures. It also is cold-conditioned, or lagered, for a period of time after fermentation is complete. Kölsch is a clean, crisp delicate beer with occasional light fruitiness, and some sweet flavor that never finishes sweet. Hop flavor and aroma are present, but more subtle than in many other styles.

**COMMERCIAL EXAMPLES:**

Reissdorf Kölsch , Gaffel Kölsch , Flying Dog Tire Bite Golden Ale, Goose Island Summertime, Alaskan Brewing Summer Ale, Harpoon Summer Beer, New Holland Lucid, Saint Arnold Fancy Lawnmower, Capitol City Capitol Kölsch, Shiner Kölsch, Matt Brewing Saranac Kölsch, Schlafly Kölsch, Geary's Summer Ale, New Holland Full Circle, etc.



## TAKE THE NEXT STEP

If you like Bud, Miller, Coors, and lighter-tasting beer, there is more out there than these bland examples of light lagers. Many coffee drinkers were previously satisfied with pre-ground Maxwell House or Folgers until they tried something better. Now it is your turn to step through the door and try better beer. You'll like what you find. ☺



We lead you in the wrong direction.

But at least we are honest.