



On-Tap

Greg Evans

Seasonal Beers

As daylight shortens, darkness grows longer and temperatures drop, people often long for the warmth of the fireplace, companionship and comfort food. For beer lovers, "winter warmers" often complete this picture.

Technically, winter warmers are not a strictly defined beer style. They do not have to meet rigid style criteria for flavour or colour, thus offering brewers ample opportunity to experiment and "strut their stuff." Typically rich, sweetish and full-bodied, they range in colour from amber to opaque black and are invariably higher in alcohol content than most other beers. Normally in excess of 6% percent alcohol by volume, winter warmers, and their cousins barley wines, can be "laid down" in a cellar for future consumption – similar to fine wine. During maturation, they mellow and develop greater complexity.

The tradition of adding spices and fruit to winter warmers gives them a interesting dimension and offers us a glimpse into their past. Historically, herbs and spices were added to beer for flavouring and their perceived medication and preservative qualities. This was particularly true for beers to be consumed during the harsh winter months, which were customarily brewed earlier in the fall. Malt levels for these beers were substantial, resulting in higher alcohol levels that in turn provided the required preservative quality. Winter was also a time of celebration so it was common for brewers to produce strong beers enriched with special seasonings to accompany holidays and festivals.

Today, winter warmers are making a comeback with more on the market every year. Many are produced locally, such as the following four:

Fireside Ale, new from Gulf Islands Brewery, is an unfiltered seasonal ale that is packaged in an attractive ceramic bottle with a swing top. This ale is copper

coloured, rich and full-bodied. Gently hopped, it has a smooth sweetness and a long, warming finish. Dark chestnut in colour, it has a rich malt palate with hints of plum spiciness.

Hermannator, from Vancouver Island Brewery, is a sought after "ice beer." This process involves lowering the temperature of the final beer until ice crystals form. Since alcohol has a lower freezing point than water and doesn't form crystals, when the ice is filtered off, the alcohol concentration increases.

Available on draft from Canoe Brewpub is their **Winter Bock**, a deep amber brew that has been described as "subtly complex." Aged for two months at near freezing, this bock weighs in at 7% alcohol by volume. Munich and Vienna malt is used along with Hallertau and Spalter, resulting in a very drinkable beer with subtle hop overtones.

Also available is **Merry Monks** from Granville Island Brewing. It's a strong mahogany coloured lager brewed in the tradition of a German doppelbock. Six different malts were used to give this beer its complex and smooth full body. Lagered for a full eight weeks, this beer has a raisiny sweetness, a slight warming from the high alcohol content, followed by a dry roasty quality.

So as the cold winter nights approach, consider a rich winter warmer for dessert or for relaxing in front of the fireplace with family or friends. You're sure to taste delightful spicy or fruity overtones, hints of chocolate or coffee - each beer different and a credit to the brewer's craft. What a grand way to fight off "Old Man Winter."

Greg Evans is the Executive Director of the Maritime Museum of B.C. He is also a brewing historian who has published articles, appeared on TV and radio, and is an active member of the Campaign for Real Ale Victoria (CAMRA).

Greg Evans conducts private in-house and corporate beer tastings using a wide range of naturally brewed beers from local, regional, and international breweries.

Contact Greg at brewersgold@shaw.ca or through Platinum Magazine (250) 595-5940.