



ALL IN THE FAMILY

Ales and Lagers – Both lagers and ales can be found in a rainbow of colors and an even more diverse and wonderful variety of flavors.

Modern craft brewing has brought diversity back to the American public. A few decades ago, all most consumers knew about beer was what brand they wanted to buy. Today there's a wide array of beer styles.

The world of alcoholic beverages recognized as beer is divided into two “families” – based on fermentation characteristics – known as ales and lagers. While most people are familiar with these terms, not everyone understands the difference, let alone what beer style belongs in which family.

Ale is the ancestor of all beer, as man has been brewing beer at ambient (room) temperature since the dawn of civilization. Lager is a much more recent discovery, generally made possible by cold storage and refrigeration.

At warmer temperatures (70 F), ales ferment rather quickly, producing fruity and floral aromas and flavors. The cooler temperatures of lager brewing produce less aromas and flavors, resulting in beer described as clean and crisp.

The key factor determining a beer's family is the type of yeast used to ferment the wort (a sugary solution made from steeping crushed grain in hot water). Traditionally, we call ale yeast “top fermenting” and lager yeast “bottom fermenting”. For centuries, ale brewers gathered yeast from the top of an open fermenter; the warm fermentation created a thick layer of foamy yeast. Cold temperature lager brewing creates a much thinner layer, so the yeast is collected from the bottom of the vessel.

Within beer families are smaller groups of “styles” that share many characteristics. There are also “subcategories” within each style. For example, the ale family has a style called “stout,” with primary subcategories such as Irish Dry, Sweet, Oatmeal, Foreign Extra, American, and Russian Imperial. A lager style called “pilsner” can be further divided into Bohemian, German, Classic American, and International.

There are also a few “hybrid” beer styles made using ale yeast at lager fermentation temperatures or vice versa. Hybrids include American steam beer (a.k.a. California common), kolsch, alt, cream ale, and blonde ale.

There are many different beer style guidelines. Most are set up for competitions to allow clearly defined categories and enable a greater number of awards. For example, the 2009 Great American Beer Festival had 78 categories. This article primarily uses the 23 styles from the Beer Judge Certification Program Style Guidelines (bjcp.org).

Let's start with ales. The original ale was closest to “lambic,” today most associated with Belgium. But all early brewers regardless of geography employed wild airborne yeast (known as “spontaneous fermentation”). It generally contains many other microbiota that affect a beer's characteristics. Today, most

brewers employ yeasts specifically propagated, many from a single yeast cell, to yield very specific characteristics.

For millennia, all beer was brown, a result of drying the malted barley over fire, which also produced a smoky aroma and flavor. Because of wild yeast fermentation and wood vessel conditioning, all beer had some stage of sourness. Dark color, smokiness, and sourness have been engineered out of most beer today, unless the style calls for it.

The ale family includes limbic, amber, Irish red, Scottish and Scotch ale, brown, mild, bitter, pale, India pale ale, porter, stout, old ale, barley wine, American derivatives (American brown, American pale, etc.), German wheat (weizen) and rye (roggen) beer, Belgian and french ales, Belgian strong ales, and the sour ales (Flanders, Berliner).

The lager family includes pilsner, Munich helles, Dortmunder, Munich dunkel, amber lagers, (Vienna, marzen/Oktobertfest), bock, American lagers (light, premium, malt liquor, etc.), international lagers, and schwarzbier (black beer).

Other styles (produced with ale or lager yeast) can be made with the addition of fruits, vegetables, spices, herbs, specialty ingredients like smoke flavor, or made with special processes like hot stones, gluten-free, conditioned in wood barrels, high alcohol, and any combination of the above.

There are far too many subcategories – and subtleties – to list here (visit the Style Guidelines at bjcp.org for a detailed description). But here are a few general guidelines: **For ales**, think complex fruit and floral, served less cold, and generally paired with red meats and richer foods. **For lagers**, think crisp and clean, served colder, and generally paired with lighter meats and delicate flavors.

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