



BIG BEERS

As the cool weather kicks in, brewers and beer fans turn to big brews, which are increasingly diverse. Here's our pick for winter.

WORDS JAMES SMITH

Just as wine drinkers' minds are likely to drift towards big reds as the winter cold encroaches, so too with beer lovers, who tend to seek out big beers. The majority of Australian breweries spend the end of each year fretting

over whether they have stockpiled enough of their golden/pale/wheat/summer ale to get through the coming heat. But come the middle of the year, you'll find many trying to set new records for the amount of grain that can be squeezed into their mash tun.

"Big" can, of course, mean many things in the world of beers. There are sours that pack intense, palate-pounding experiences into beers registering no more than three- or four-per-cent alcohol. And there are powerfully hoppy, bitter, high-alcohol double or imperial IPAs released year-round. Come winter though, it is time for others to shine. Or should that be 'loom menacingly'?

Imperial porters and stouts, beastly Belgians, warming barley wines and their ilk come into their own as the mercury plummets. And as the Australian industry matures, more appear each year.

Perhaps the biggest of them all belongs to WA's Nail Brewing. The fourth vintage of its Clout Stout has been released and while there is a more expensive Australian beer (the annual Crown Ambassador) and a few with greater alcohol content, its combination of intensity, ABV, price, name, collection of gold medals and trophies – and the brewer's intent – make for a potent package.

Originally brewed to mark Nail's 10th anniversary, the small number of 750ml bottles released each year are highly sought after, even at \$70. It is a labour of love, a beer for which brewer John Stallwood sets the highest standards each year and one that requires patience too; the first batch in 2010 was kept at the brewery for 18 months until John deemed it ready.

"It's a special-occasion beer," John says. "It's unique – something to share

with someone and enjoy together. You drink these beers for the appreciation, not to get drunk. A lot of lager drinkers would be offended by drinking it; it's more for someone who is a bit of a beer connoisseur, who can appreciate it a bit more."

It's also one that poses greater challenges than anything else Nail releases. "Selling it so expensive means it has to be the best and continue to win golds and awards," John says.

This pressure means that unless John is 100 per cent happy, he will keep brewing batches until one achieves what the title Clout Stout signifies. Hence, this year there is also a Nail Imperial Porter: a fantastic, luxurious beer originally brewed to be Clout Stout

2014, but didn't quite hit the powerful peaks John demands. The outcome is a good one for the connoisseurs – two big Nails for winter instead of one.

When it comes to creating big Belgian-style beers, few in Australia do it as well as Warwick Little of Port Macquarie's Little Brewing Company in New South Wales. Under the Mad Abbot banner, he has released a rich, complex Dubbel, a delicate (despite being 9.5 per cent ABV) Tripel and, most recently, a Christmas Ale, released in the middle of the year.

The Christmas Ale is based on the Belgian quadrupel style, in particular his 'epiphany beer' – and still favourite drop – the Rochefort 10. Both are 11.3 per cent ABV. ➔

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JOHN STALLWOOD / BREWER, NAIL BREWING



TO TRY

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MORE THAN ANYTHING, THESE BEERS ARE A BOLD STATEMENT OF HOW FAR AND FAST THE BEER WORLD IS CHANGING.

JON SELTIN

BREWER / BRIGHT BREWERY

NAIL BREWING CLOUT STOUT 2014

The latest vintage of this powerful statement of beer should be out now and is suitable for cellaring. / 10.7% alc



LITTLE BREWING COMPANY MAD ABBOT CHRISTMAS ALE

You may still be able to find some of the 2013 release to set up a side-by-side tasting of this complex, rich, spicy, fruity and warming Belgian ale. / 11.3% alc



BRIGHT BREWERY STUBBORN RUSSIAN

The barrel-aged beers mentioned in the article may be draught-only, but this receives a short-run bottled release each year. / 9.5% alc



HARGREAVES HILL PHOENIX IMPERIAL RED ALE

Usually only brewed every couple of years, this potent red ale is a gleaming, luscious barrage of rich toffee and caramel malts. / 10.7% alc



MORNINGTON PENINSULA BREWERY IMPERIAL STOUT

The 2013 Australian International Beer Awards Best Stout from these masters of dark beers is becoming a modern Aussie classic. / 10.7% alc



As a brewer, Warwick says part of the appeal of creating such beers is the interest it creates on brew day. "There is an excitement around the place when you're making something like the Christmas Ale," he says. This contrasts with the day-in, day-out brewing of other beers such as their flagship Pale.

"It's exciting for the drinker as well. The complexity in the malt bill for our Dubbel and Christmas Ale is huge. We run out of room [on the brew log] in which to list all the ingredients. The Christmas Ale is like a meal in itself. When we first brewed it and had it lying around, [my wife] Kylie and I would have one every day, late in the afternoon when work was finished. It was a beer to relax to, a contemplation beer to be savoured, especially with really strong cheese."

If you are noticing a theme here with "occasion beers", it's with good reason. Jon Seltin, head brewer at Bright Brewery in the Victorian High Country and one of the finest young brewers in the country, waxes lyrical about his fond memories of sharing these styles of beer, sometimes brought back from trips overseas. "There's a ritual," Jon says. "They often come in big bottles, not because you want people to get drunk, but because they are meant for an occasion."

They tend to test a brewer too. Nail's John Stallwood admits to not having "total control" when creating his Clout, while Bright's Jon says he relishes the technical challenges.

"There's pressure in creating a huge mass of flavours yet still maintaining

balance," Jon says. "Brewing big beers raises a huge number of technical problems. You don't want them to be flabby or overwhelmed by the high amount of alcohol. You want to pack in a lot of stuff, but not make it a cacophony of noise or a mess of solventy alcohol. It's more about creating something elegant."

Jon has several big beers out this winter, inspired in part by the fact "it really is bloody cold up here" in the High Country. As well as Bright's annual Stubbob Russian Imperial Stout, he has been playing with barrels from Melbourne's New World Whisky Distillery, obtained on the day they were drained and thus "incredibly juicy and imparting a huge amount of flavour". They have been used to age a portion of the Stubbob Russian, a new porter and the brewery's Belgian style Fainters Dubbel.

"These new beers coming out of the barrels are my favourite," Jon says. "The Dubbel spent seven months in barrels so there is less bitterness and it's now incredibly smooth and has picked up whisky and oak characters."

More than anything, these beers are a bold statement of how far and fast the beer world is changing. "Brewers aren't just producing beers that are for quaffing at summertime barbecues," Jon says. "We brew these beers for completely different purposes. They are quite rare and incredibly expensive to make. Often they become the flagship beers for a brewery and can make for really special experiences." 