

The Beverage People  
1845 Piner Road Suite D  
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

## Making A Baltic Porter

*By Bob Peak and Joe Hanson-Hirt*

Imagine yourself in the 19th century departing London in a sailing ship to travel across the North Sea. Your eastward journey turns north around Denmark and then back to the southeast. Perhaps your port of call is Malmö at the southern tip of Sweden. A seaport for centuries, that city lies just across the Øresund strait from Copenhagen. After your stop in Malmö, sail further east and then turn northeast into the Baltic Sea. Next port of call: Riga, now in Latvia but part of the Russian Empire at the time of our imaginary voyage. As you go ashore, will you be looking for a pub that offers a light lager? Even a pale ale? No! It's time for a Baltic Porter. As I write this in February, the weather report for Riga is a high of 31°F with a low of 27°. No wimpy, pale beer today!

The Porter family in the guidelines of the Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP) has just three members. The first, Brown Porter, is the one most associated with the famous English porters of modern times; beers like Fuller's London Porter and Samuel Smith Taddy Porter. Those beers are usually about 4 to 5.4% alcohol by volume (abv). They are rich, brown, malty ales. The next category, Robust Porter, takes things up a notch with abv running in the 4.8 to 6.5% range. These richer, often darker, porters include many of the famous American interpretations of the porter style. These include such modern stalwarts as Anchor Porter, Sierra Nevada Porter, and Deschutes Black Butte Porter.

Then we come to today's style: Baltic Porter. These beers are even bigger, working well into the range we might consider a "winter warmer." Alcohol levels range from 5.5% to a whopping 9.5% abv. As the name suggests, many of the commercial examples are made in the countries that border the Baltic Sea: Sinebrychoff Porter from Finland, Okocim Porter and Zywiec Porter from Poland, Baltika #6 Porter from Russia, and Carnegie Stark Porter from Sweden among them. Other examples may be encountered from places like Latvia, Germany, and Norway (which is not on the Baltic, but is "Baltic adjacent").

Just as high hopping rates in India Pale Ale helped historic examples make the long journey from England to India, the Baltic Porter style was influenced by shipping. Both this beer and the similar Russian Imperial Stout started with beers made by English brewers and intended to survive our imaginary voyage into the Baltic. High alcohol helped preserve the beer and use of dark malts provided flavors that helped mask any flaws. While stock ale was added to some historic examples adding a slight sour note, Baltic Porter has moved toward a cleaner character in the centuries since that time. After the historic development of lager beers in Europe, Baltic Porters have mostly moved to fermentation with lager yeast for a clean, crisp character.

Often using a Munich or Vienna malt base, these beers are enhanced with debittered chocolate or black malts. Some examples also use caramel malts or sugar adjuncts. Brown and amber malt may be found in examples that mimic historic styles. The beer is dark brown and sometimes opaque, but never black. The head should be tan in color, thick and persistent.

Flavors and aromas follow a pattern much like Imperial Stout with rich maltiness, dark chocolate, roast, and toasted caramel. Dark roasted flavors should always stop short of a burnt note, just as in the finest German black lagers (schwarzbiers). There are often aromas and flavors of fruits like dried figs, raisins, cherries, and prunes. Caramel flavors can extend to hints of molasses. Hopping is relatively restrained, primarily for bittering, using continental spicy varieties. Altogether a rich, round, roasty dark beer for sipping on a cold winter's night. As we launched this project, neither Joe nor I had previous experience making this style. But we have made other porters, schwarzbiers, and even imperial stouts, so we felt well prepared to take on this Sea of Troubles (see sidebar) and find out how our journey goes!

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