

A taste for the robust: Baltic Porter

by Przemysław Myszk

Many of you, who know me, may well have observed that for a couple of months now I've been more than willing to flood everybody willing to listen (or not) with beer intel and lore, especially 'bout my favourite American (APA) and Indian Pale Ale (IPA) styles, preaching the joys of the ongoing beer revolution through the motto – borrowed from the Polish-born Tomasz Kopyra, a beer blogg- and vlogger – “Life's too short to drink poor beer.” Lo and behold, our very own regional speciality, sub-category 12c of the Beer Judge Certification Program Style Guidelines, Baltic Porter!

The origins of Baltic Porter trace back to early 18th century London, whose breweries began making a well-hopped, top yeast fermentation beer, at first exclusively with the use of brown malt (cheaper than its pale counterpart). The new product quickly rose to prominence, by and large among porters – dockers and transport workers who carried freight to and fro the city's harbours, and who needed a refreshing but relatively strong drink to go about their duties. As such, the name “porter” was associated with the new beer.

A staple

Then the economies of scale kicked in. The first porter batches were matured, for between six and 18 months, meaning that the smaller breweries stood no chance against the bigger ones, which could afford to set up large hundred-barrel-big vats. It was only later that producers discovered that by mixing younger and older brews, ultimately in a 2:1 ratio, the end product tastes like the more appreciated latter. This way or another, the overall production shot up and soon ships started carrying porter beer all over the Empire – to Ireland, North America, South Africa, and East Indies – as well as to the Baltic Sea region, also in its strongest version, stout porter (“stout” meaning in this context strong, robust, brawny), with which the Russian court quickly fell in love, giving birth to what's nowadays known as Imperial Stout.

Others followed suit and, e.g., the Scotsman William Knox founded Sweden's first porter brewery in 1791 in Gothenburg, though, he went bankrupt soon afterwards, and the Swedes had to wait almost three decades for another foreigner, Abraham Lorent, to kick-start a successful porter brewery – with a helping hand from Charles XIV who banned all porter imports. Another powermonger, this time Napoleon himself, vastly contributed to cutting the ties with England and forcing Baltic breweries to

reinvent the porter beer style. The seed was planted, and after driving off Napoleon and lifting the Continental Blockade, Baltic brewers were already fully committed to making porter a staple of our region. Among many, Nikolai Petrovič Sinebrychhoff founded in Helsinki in 1819 the Sinebrychhoff Brewery, the oldest still-operating brewery in the Nordic countries, producing the Sinebrychhoff Porter. However, unlike modern Baltic Porters, it's still a top fermentation stout, although a relatively strong one, yet at least a notch below contemporary Baltic Porters, especially those from Poland (which can easily go beyond 9-10% alcohol by volume). Another one, the 1807-London-founded A. Le Coq, which later relocated to the Estonian Tartu, continues to brew one of the region's oldest porters, A. Le Coq Porter. The Germans, especially those from the eastern parts of the country, have been brewing porters at least since the mid-19th century, however, with a several-year-long halt after reunification. The oldest “Polish” porter, Żywiec Porter, comes from the breweries in Żywiec and Cieszyn, back in 1881, when the recipe was formulated, under the patronage of Archduke Albrecht Friedrich Rudolf Dominik of Austria, Duke of Teschen, since Poland didn't exist as a state then. Nowadays, the country is considered *the* place for brewing Baltic Porters.

Heaven come true

By using bottom fermentation lager yeast as well as exchanging British malt and hops for continental ones, the Baltic Porter gained a cleaner profile, with good clarity. Colour stretches from dark reddish copper or mahogany to opaque dark brown (yet not pitch black). The head should be thick, creamy, long-lasting, and in the tan colour range. Baltic Porters are well-renowned for their complex, multi-layered flavours. Baltic Porters can be either a mix of caramel, chocolate, nutty, coffee, and even licorice taste, or go the toast, roasted dark bread crust lane – both, however, with mellow

alcohol warmth, a slightly drying finish, and absolutely no sourness.

Alike e.g. wine, Baltic Porters, particularly those stronger ones, can be matured in bottles – the best before labelling being nothing more than a legal must in their case (after all, beer's a consumable). As Baltic Porters age (for years on end in good cellar conditions), their numerous flavour facets, which at first might be sharp and quite distinct from each other, smoothen out and harmonise. Oxidation adds its two pennies' worth, too, pronouncing possible plum, raisin, prune, cherry, or current flavours. Baltic Porters can also be aged in barrels, typical after bourbon whiskey, which apart from the above-mentioned gives the beer a vanilla layer that's really hard to miss.

Taken together, Baltic Porter is heaven come true for malt beer lovers, those with a particular knack for spiked drinks. Then again, this style isn't really a feast for hop heads – people obsessed with bitterness units. That said, every well-rounded, ‘pukka’ beer needs bitterness to balance the maltiness, in Baltic Porters more in taste than in flavour (if any).

An embarrassment of riches

Depending on one's preferences and experience (ice cold international green bottle malt lager drinkers can have it hard), a Baltic Porter can be either a sensation – love at first, well, sip – or an acquired taste. It's a challenging style, the very opposite of a session beer, but one that gives much in return for the patience of learning how to taste it.

Luckily, we're in the middle of the ongoing beer revolution, which also brought Baltic Porter in vogue, especially in Poland. There are literally tens of dozens of new Baltic Porters launched each year in the country, even more Baltic-wide, and we've been celebrating the Baltic Porter Day every third Saturday of January since 2016, a tradition which also originated in Poland. In other words, a genuine embarrassment of riches! Cheers!