

As the Earth Tilts, So Does the Pint Glass

Winter Solstice and the
History of Brewing in
the Winter

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Philly Beer Geek 2010



As the days get shorter and the nights get colder, the beer gets... stronger?!

What is the true reason certain beers are brewed for certain seasons?

Could there even be a divine connection?

Dating back long before the technical revolutions in brewing – most notably refrigeration and temperature control – brewers had to adjust their brewing habits to the seasons.

They were forced to pack their beers with high alcohol content and a generous amount of hops in the summer so their brews could make it through the heat without spoiling. During the winter the opposite occurred – the lower temperatures gave brewers the flexibility to make much lighter style ales and lagers. Thus, as pint glasses were being filled with barley wines and winter warmers during the cold months, the kettles and fermenters were bustling with lighter beers for the upcoming spring and summer. Farmhouse ales (Saisons), for example, were specifically brewed in colder months, because they yielded low alcohol brews for consumption by farm workers during the summer.

Now, of course, the weather doesn't significantly affect commercial breweries as it did in the past, but there is still a definite impact on the home-brewer. Controlling temperature variables is much harder in the casual basement brewery. One example is the process of adding yeast. The boiling liquid must be cooled down quickly or the fermenting agent will be destroyed. Summer temperatures make this step much more difficult. Additionally, the summer heat also makes keeping fermentation temperatures consistent, a real chore. Consequently, home brewers

often follow the brewing patterns of their ancient predecessors.

Coincidence or Godliness?

There is also another aspect to the heartier beers traditionally consumed during the winter months. Although the term "Winter Solstice" technically refers to an instant in time when the earth's tilt is farthest from the sun, it is commonly used to mean the entire mid-winter period. Almost every medieval culture and religion in the world held special holidays, festivals and rituals to help get them through these dark, cold days. A strong-brewed beer was the perfect beverage for these ancient celebrations.

Since we now find ourselves in our own winter holiday season, I pose this question: *"Is it an accident that our ancestors were forced to brew the strong beers that are ideal for winter, or as I suspect, is there a divine reason for this occurrence?"* Keep in mind, many early civilizations and religions thought of beer as a gift from their gods and goddesses. There is even a Patron Saint of Brewers recognized by the Catholic Church and many medieval monasteries often functioned as the local brewery. Thus, maybe it is more than mere coincidence that we crave those stronger beers when the temperature starts to drop.

I'm not the only one to link beer to a higher power. According to Benjamin Franklin – the original and most famous Philly Beer Geek – *"Beer is living proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy."*

Of course, we'll never really know if strong winter beers are divinely inspired or simply a matter of the changing seasons. Either way, we get the chance to enjoy some wonderful beers this time of year. I say "Amen" to that!

Beer Geek

Trivia Fact:

Would you believe that in 1553, summer brewing was outlawed altogether in Bavaria? By then, the authorities, who always worried about the supply of healthy summer beer, had learned that cold fermentation yielded a purer beer with better keeping qualities than beer brewed in the sweltering months of the summer. The official brewing season was therefore restricted to the time between St. Michael's Day (September 29) and St. George's Day (April 23).

