

Selling Vintage Beer

BY MICHAEL KUDERKA



The popularity of craft beer and the creativity of craft beer brewers have brought to the market a wide range of collectable brands. Beyond the cult-like following for limited release offerings, and the clamoring of consumers for hard-to-find and collaboration brands, many beer connoisseurs are now being drawn to seek out and hoard cellarable or vintage brands.

Like other aged beverages, certain beers can also evolve in complexity over time which can significantly enhance the flavor profile and provide a more dynamic beer experience. What makes beer stand out as an age-able beverage is that its age-ability is less dependent on the beer style, and more dependent on the brand's specific ingredients. Certainly as a style, Old Ales, Barley Wines and Imperial Stouts allow for a higher rate of cellaring success; however, some Christmas beers, spice based beers, and Belgian-style brands can also be excellent choices for aging.

Few retailers are investing in aging beer, but with the right selection and a little time, vintage beer can offer significantly better returns to the bottom line.

BETTING ON VINTAGE BEER

In his book *Vintage Beer: A Taster's Guide to Brews That Improve Over Time* (Storey Publishing), Patrick Dawson not only explains the joys of aged beer and the unique flavors and aromas that develop over time, but he also defines rules for selecting beer for cellaring and the best beer brands for aging.

BT: How much can the value of a brand

increase with age? Any examples?

PD: It seems very few off-premise stores have realized this trend, at least enough to start cellaring beers themselves. Restaurants and beer bars on the other hand have jumped on the bandwagon and it seems that a 10-15% markup per year of storage is about average. For really rare beers though, that can go up considerably. For example, Woodstock Deli in Portland sells Batch #1 bottles of Hair of the Dog's Adam for something like \$200, a beer that was just a few bucks when it first came out. That is a very rare beer though, so cases like that are the high end of the spectrum.

BT: If a retailer wants to invest in a few brands for cellaring what are some rules for selection and which styles, brewers, or brands might they consider?

PD: First and foremost, a beer needs to be one of the three Ss: Strong, Sour, or Smoked. The crucial component of these beers (acidity, high ABV, smoke phenols) essentially acts as a preservative, slowing the aging of the beer. This is vital because the vintage flavors (think sherry, treacle, dried fruit, etc.) that make aging worthwhile are very slow-to-emerge and it's necessary to be able to buy time for them to develop. I personally think one of the best ways to experience how a beer ages is to buy multiple bottles and open one each six months. This allows the drinker to experience the changes and determine at what age they like it best. For this, six-packs or four-packs are great.

BT: Do barrel-aged beers cellar well? How about sour ales?

PD: Barrel-aged beers are an interesting lot to cellar. The important thing to understand about them is they are already aged prior to sale, making them "instant" vintage beer for the consumers. Some can benefit from more time, but many are released drinking excellently. Sour ales are very similar in this sense. Most have been aged by the brewery and it comes down to each individual beer as to whether it's worthwhile to cellar them any longer. In general, sour ales are going to become less malty, and more "bretty" as they age. They could also become more sour if they are released young. It's best to taste the beer "fresh" and determine if it could use more time. Always, buy two if you can afford it!

BT: What would be ten safe bets for a retailer to age?

PD: I would say ten safe bets for cellaring would be:

- Rodenbach Grand Cru
- Stone Double Bastard
- North Coast Old Stock
- Goose Island's Sofie
- Dogfish Head Olde School
- Uniboue Trois Pistoies
- JW Lees Harvest Ale
- Rochefort 10
- Boon Mariage Parfait Geuze
- Bell's Expedition Stout

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