

FIRST Draft

Pour yourself
a cold one
and study up
on beer

It's almost October, and you know what that means. No, not Halloween. That's for kids.

Oktoberfest, the German beer festival, is almost upon us. This "holiday" of sorts is held in Munich, Germany, in late September and early October every year—never mind the replications that take place in cities the world over.

So, before you head to your next Oktoberfest party, it's time to brush up on beer, because there's much more to know than bottle versus draft.

WHAT ARE HOPS?

Hops come from a perennial vining plant, the flower of which, when boiled at the beginning of the brewing process, releases an acid that contributes to beer's bitter taste and balances the sweetness of malting. At the end of the beer-making process, though, brewmasters may add more hops to give the beverage a floral or grassy flavor or aroma.

WHAT DETERMINES HOW DARK A BEER IS?

When a brewmaster soaks the grains in warm water, enzymes are released which changes the grain to a malt (and thus, why beer is considered a malt beverage). The grains are then dried out, and the beer's color is determined by how long and how hot they're roasted.

"Pale beers were revolutionary," says Bryce Eddings, the beer guide for About.com. "No one had been able to keep beers that light before."

Coincidentally, Eddings points out, they emerged about the same time that people started to drink beer out of glass mugs.

OK, BUT WHAT CAN I EAT WITH IT?

You often hear about pairing wine with food, but seldom do you hear about beer-food matches—unless it's chicken wings. And that, Eddings says, isn't even a good pairing. "Because the wings are so hot, they turn almost anything you drink into water," he says.

Instead, he suggests, consider surprising your guests with a dessert-and-beer pairing. Put a dark chocolate dessert with a stout that is rich and dark and has a low sugar percentage. "It's a pretty exciting thing," Eddings says.

IS AMERICAN BEER SO BAD?

It's a common misconception that American beer is just plain bad. Or at best, weak. What U.S. grocery stores are guilty of, however, is a lack of variety. "Imagine if all the wine you had to choose from was all cheap Pinot Gris with a few reds in the corner," Eddings says.

"The American beer palate has actually become more sophisticated," Eddings says. That's evidenced by the sales of craft beer, which jumped more than 30 percent from 2003 to 2006. —By **Stephanie Conner**

What's on tap?

At Kelsey's restaurant at Pechanga Resort & Casino, you'll find a dozen draft beers, including the three shown here. Kelsey's Amber (front), an English-style ale, uses distinctive American hops, which give it a crisp bitterness to balance the malt and adds a hint of floral aroma. Blue Moon (center), a Belgian-style wheat ale, has a unique citrus after flavor, making it great served with a slice of orange. The water used to make Guinness Stout (back) is from springs fed by the St. James Well, but it's the steamed, rolled and roasted barley that give the brew a dark-ruby color.