

Paste

20 of the Best North Carolina Beers

By Jim Vorel | April 18, 2017 | 3:23pm

Photos by Paste

[DRINK](#) > [LISTS](#) > [BEST NORTH CAROLINA BEERS](#)

[f](#) Share

[t](#) Tweet

[u](#) Submit

[p](#) Pin



Since *Paste* began hosting large-scale blind tastings of craft beer styles in 2015, it's safe to say we have tasted a *lot of beers*. The sheer numbers are mind-boggling even to us, reaching beyond the hundreds and into the thousands of separate brews. All of the data from these tastings has continued to be archived on *Paste*, primarily [here](#) and [here](#), but until now it's solely been partitioned into various lists by beer style.

Recently, we realized that this was missing out on a useful way to present this information, which was to group the beers by *state of origin*. That way, if you're planning a vacation to California, Maine, Oregon, Colorado or some other great beer state, you can look up a *Paste* list to find a

ready-made Easter egg hunt of great beers to look for while you're there. And not only that—the vast majority of these beers are ones that excelled in **blind tasting** settings. That's a big deal, and the significance of it shouldn't be overlooked. If you've ever had the opportunity to taste beers in a totally blind environment, you know how different and enlightening the results can be when you remove hype and labels from the equation.

The below list isn't meant to be viewed as the absolute best beers from [North Carolina](#), one of America's best and most varied beer states thanks to cities such as Charlotte, Winston-Salem and of course the beer Mecca that is Asheville. Such a list would be difficult to pull off for any publication without being based in the state.

What we *can* tell you is that [North Carolina](#) has provided quite a few great beers over the course of our blind tastings. Asheville alone, in terms of output, has landed more beers in our rankings than many small states that don't happen to be blessed with well developed craft beer communities. So if you find yourself in North Carolina sometime soon, go out of your way to track these beers down.

The beers below are not ranked, and are simply presented in alphabetical order.



Asheville Brewing Co. Ninjabread Man

City: Asheville, NC

ABV: 5.6%

The verdict: This is how you do the “Christmas cookie”-style spiced beer right—it's all about balance of spice intensity, the underlying beer and residual sweetness. ABC knows how to make a porter already, considering that they have a whole yearly line of various “Ninjas,” which helps put this beer on a solid footing. You get pronounced cinnamon and gingerbread on the nose, which is sweet, fragrant and inviting—distinctly different from some of the gingery Christmas ales that initially smell like spicy ginger ale/ginger beer. Cocoa notes make for an excellent supporting player, as does the “velvety texture” noted by one score sheet. A kiss of sweetness that avoids being cloying puts it right where it needs to be.



Blue Ghost Heaven Hill BBA Imperial Stout

City: Fletcher, NC

ABV: 11.8%

The verdict: It's funny to think that the craft beer landscape evolves and changes so quickly that within a few years of being a groundbreaking achievement, one can describe a bourbon barrel-aged [imperial stout](#) as



“classical,” or even “old school.” So it’s with full acknowledgement of the inherent absurdity that we dub this an excellent example of “old school” BBA stout. Perhaps that’s thanks to the Heaven Hill barrels, as they’re among the most common of all whiskey vessels used in the craft beer industry, but whatever it is, this is just a very well executed riff on what has become an understood profile. The beer has a classic roast profile; slightly drier than some of the others, with notes of French roast coffee and dark chocolate. There’s a vanilla-tinged caramel flavor that pleasantly reminds one of a Werther’s Original, and a wave of toasted oak. Classic, dependable, and downright tasty. This may be a new beer, but it’s exactly the sort of imperial stout that popularized the style in the first place.

Advertisement



Burial Beer Co. Shadowclock

City: Asheville, NC

ABV:

The verdict: Interesting coincidence here, with two of Asheville’s best pilsners ending up right next to each other. Shadowclock actually has some similarities with Highland’s pils, being a bit more German than Czech-influenced, but it’s perhaps even a touch hoppier than the already hoppy Highland. It blends floral and herbal hop flavors with a nice note of lemon citrus. Biscuity, slightly bready malt keeps everything else in check, with a balance that still tilts pleasantly toward the hops. It’s much the same as we recently tasted in a round-up of [five beers from Burial](#), which has become one of Asheville’s most talked-about breweries.



Burial Skillet Donut Stout

City: Asheville, NC

ABV: 8%

The verdict: It’s pretty hard at this point to make a coffee stout that drinkers are going to recognize as specifically distinct from others they’ve had, and I expect that when the folks at Burial considered this reality, they must have come to a decision: Don’t try to derive its uniqueness from the coffee. Derive it from everything



else. And thus you get Skillet, a “donut” stout named for what it evokes rather than what it incorporates. If it was named for what was actually in it, they’d be calling it “Skillet Oatmeal Molasses Lactose Coffee Stout,” and that’s a significantly less zippy moniker to go by. That probably sounds complicated, but “complex” is the preferred terminology, and here it’s pretty accurate. Skillet is big on espresso-like coffee on the nose—dark, oily, sweet coffee, but on the palate the coffee takes a step back and lets the other muses shine. Malt complexity is the main thing that stands out to me, in the form of a dark, red fruit note that I typically associate with bigger imperial

stouts—although at 8% ABV, Skillet is squarely in that uncanny valley between single and double, so one sort of gets the best of both worlds. If Founders Breakfast Stout is used as an example of this type of beer that absolutely nails the chocolate/coffee combo, then Skillet is a bit more free-wheelin’ and less concerned with that particular duality.



Deep River Brewing Co. Collaboration Without Representation

City: Clayton, NC

ABV: 12.8%

The verdict: Something to keep in mind about the results of *Paste* blind tastings: These are not BJCP affairs. We’re not trying to pick which beers best fit arbitrary style guidelines. The beers that score well, often score well for entirely different, individual reasons. Extreme complexity is just as valid a reason to get a high score as simply being a straight-up crowd-pleaser. And this barrel-aged stout from [North Carolina](#)’s Deep River is the definition of “crowd pleaser.” This is not a stout trying to be the end-all, be-all of the beer industry; it just tastes amazing. An “imperial chocolate milk stout with coffee,” we’ve rarely come across a beer with such an accurate description. The beer smells like a pot of fresh brewed coffee, topped with a cap of steamed milk and some milk chocolate syrup. The barrel is judicious, supplying some caramel/vanilla that beefs up the other flavors, but ultimately this beer is driven by a really great imperial milk stout and a tantalizing coffee addition. There’s even a bit of complexity in the form of some dark, plummy fruitiness. Regardless, this feels like the kind of beer that would

have people driving cross country to buy it if it had a Tree House or Hill Farmstead label on it. If you love sweeter, coffee infused stouts, put it on your list.



D9 Head of the Horseman

City: Cornelius, NC

ABV: 9.6%

The verdict: This beer finished #6 out of 45 last year, and now it's #8 out of 59—not too shabby for D9, who seem to really know their pumpkin brews. This is a big beer that *tastes* like a big beer, with rather bombastic spices—“massive spice” to quote one score sheet. But it's not just the spice, because everything else here is burly as well. “Big, chewy maltiness with hints of dark chocolate,” reads one score sheet. “Rich, hearty but not overwhelming” reads another. In short, this is how you do “imperial pumpkin ale” right, without completely going overboard. Non-barrel-aged imperial pumpkin ales actually had a fairly tough time in this blind tasting, but if more of them were like Head of the Horseman, it would be to their betterment.

A SMARTER WAY
TO A HEALTHIER HOME.
CLEAN AND SIMPLE.



GET \$50 OFF YOUR
AIR DUCT CLEANING

zerorez.

Advertisement



Duck Rabbit Milk Stout

City: Farmville, NC

ABV: 5.7%

The verdict: Here's a beer that's been made for more than a decade at least, is the brewery's flagship, and is still flying under the radar. Not many breweries have stouts as the flagship in general, but it makes sense for Duck-Rabbit, who bill themselves as the "dark beer specialists." This is also a beer I'd heard about for a long time but had never tried until now, having come from the Midwest a year ago. We tasted a lot of milk stouts here, but with Duck-Rabbit's we were struck by complexity—in addition to the creamy texture and chocolatey flavors you would expect, there's also a wonderful, berry-like fruitiness to it. As one taster wrote, "complex, but subtle." It feels like a beer with some age on it, a recipe that has been carefully tended to and dialed in over a long period of time. It tastes like craftsmanship.



Foothills Brewing Co. Hoppyum IPA

City: Winston-Salem, NC

ABV: 6.3%

The verdict: Foothills' other well-known IPA, Jade, tends to be the more highly touted between the two, but in this tasting it was actually the year-round offering, Hoppyum, which shined brighter—it's easy to see why this is the brewery's biggest year-round seller. An all Simcoe IPA, it has all of that hop variety's usual trademarks—strong pineyness, citrus and a bit of hard-to-place earthiness that defies description. A fairly well-balanced drinker, this one isn't just about delivering a hop profile, but rather a complete beer with a few rough edges that give it character and memorability.



Highland Brewing Black Mocha

City: Asheville, NC

ABV: 5%

The verdict: Here's a beer we've all had before, but tasting it alongside a bunch of other stouts, it's interesting how it stands out. Hops are the deciding factor—among the beers in the finals, this may have been the hoppiest of them all, with clean, pleasant hop aromas of orange and pine on the nose that were easy to pick up in comparison to all the others. The malt character is dark chocolate and fairly dry, making for an easy-drinking pint that is



balanced by that hop backbone—more hop flavor than hop-derived bitterness. Tasting it, you might think it was some kind of “West Coast American stout,” but instead it’s [North Carolina](#). Regardless, this may be the best year-round beer that Highland makes, superbly balanced stuff.



Highland Clawhammer Oktoberfest

City: Asheville, NC

ABV: 5%

The verdict: The interesting thing about märzen is that small ABV deviations (1 or 2 points) seem to stand out more in this style than they do in others, but at the same time, even a lower-ABV märzen can still feature some bigger flavors as a result of various specialty malts, such as the commonly used Vienna or Munich malt classic to the style. Highland’s märzen, Clawhammer, is nicely dry and quite drinkable, but it also has one of those specific notes of malt complexity that helps it stand out on a table full of märzen—in this case, a low-key nutty flavor, or even a bit of cocoa powder that makes it feel a little bit bigger than it is. Perhaps that’s just how we’re perceiving a very dark, toasty malt presence, but it’s nice to have an alternative märzen in this style that is quite toasty without also featuring significant residual sugar or fruitiness for once.



Highland Brewing Co. Pilsner

City: Asheville, NC

ABV: 5.5%

The verdict: This seems like a beer that would have been part of Highland's regular lineup for a long time, but it's actually a new beer that joined the year-rounders only a couple of months ago. You could sort of call it a "nouveu German" pilsner, as it's made with a blend of German hop varieties—but they're mostly the new varieties such as Hallertauer Blanc that are bridging the gap between what we think of as American and "continental" hop profiles. Regardless, you're left with a nose that is both floral and fruity, complemented by light, crisp malt. It's a pleasantly hoppy German-style pilsner with a nice degree of complexity.



Advertisement



NoDa Brewing Co. CAVU

City: Charlotte, NC

Style: American blonde ale

ABV: 4.6%

The verdict: This is what we like in an “American blonde ale”—a beer that packs more surprises under the hood than expected, given the description. It has the nicely bready malt flavors that one might hope for in this sort of style, but we were pleasantly surprised by a good charge of tropical fruity hops as well—think grapefruit and pineapple, which contribute a subtle fruit-juicy sweetness. Very nicely balanced and well-conceived in the first place, this is a beer that could reasonably be a fridge staple at just about any time of year, not just the summer.



NoDa Brewing Co. Gordgeous

City: Charlotte, NC

ABV: 6.4%

The verdict: NoDa makes their intentions to make a non-standard pumpkin beer immediately clear on the can for Gordgeous, and you have to at least admire their gumption. In addition to using plenty of actual pumpkin and brown sugar in each batch (which actually lightens body and enhances drinkability), they willfully choose to go a different route with the spices by not including any cinnamon or nutmeg. Rather, it’s instead heavy on allspice, cardamom, cloves and ginger root, which gives Gordgeous an immediately different nose than other beers on the table. The ginger is instantly recognizable and pops strongly—it actually reminded me of a Belgian witbier I had in Huntsville, AL, from Yellowhammer Brewing Co. Others picked up on “raw pumpkin flavor,” which, along with the ginger, makes for a rather more complex and thoughtful beer than many on the table. The spices might be a little abrasive to some, but you get definite points for being unique in this field.



NoDa Brewing Co. Hop, Drop ‘n Roll

City: Charlotte, NC

ABV: 7.2%

The verdict: When you’ve got a 2014 World Beer Cup gold medalist just barely scraping into the top 50, then you know you’ve got a seriously amazing lineup of IPAs on hand. NoDa’s Hop, Drop ‘n Roll might be called an excellent example of the loosely defined, now infrequently seen “East coast IPA” substyle in the way it balances its hop bill with a hefty balance of chewy, toasty, bready malt body. The hops are still layered on top in bunches, with character that vacillates between dank, sticky resin and perfume/grassiness. Assertive, full-bodied and in no



way lacking character, Hop, Drop 'n Roll makes its presence felt.



The Olde Mecklenburg Brewery (OMB) Hornet's Nest

City: Charlotte, NC

ABV: 5.4%

The verdict: Here's a hefe that seems to split the difference between the American and German interpretations of the style, and does so quite successfully. There's plenty of wheat malt-driven flavor, with bread crust and a bit of more toasted malt, which gives it a hint of sweetness. Lemon citrus is light, and makes good bedfellows with some light banana esters, but nothing too over the top. The creamy, silky mouthfeel is one thing that sets Hornet's Nest apart—we tasted a good number of beers in this lineup with similar flavors, but few of them had such a pleasant texture. In a style like hefeweizen, those little things go a long way.



Triple C Brewing Co. The Baby Maker

City: Charlotte, NC

ABV: 8.5%

The verdict: An interesting, unusual DIPA from a brewery recently recommended to *Paste* via readership, Triple C's Baby Maker is a fairly unapologetic malt bomb, compared to most of these offerings. Ruby red in color, it's powered by both deep caramel/dried fruit/Grape Nut-like flavors and piney hop bitterness. There are some beers on the table that tended to come off as "barleywine lite," but this one almost makes us think more of the ill-defined "American strong ale." Regardless, if you're looking for a comparison, something like Stone's Arrogant Bastard is a good place to start. This one certainly packs a lot of flavor into an 8.5% ABV frame.

Advertisement



Wicked Weed Brewing Golden Angel

City: Asheville, NC

ABV: 7%

The verdict: To close your eyes and take a sip of Wicked Weed's Golden Angel, you would think you were biting into the juiciest apricot known to man. Not some apricot that exists in 2015, mind you, culled from the fields of some mundane farm—more like an apricot plucked from the Garden of Eden, so juicy that it might as well be dripping down your chin. And that makes sense when you read that a full 2.5 pounds of fruit are used in this beer per gallon, which would almost seem excessively decadent if it weren't so delicious. That works out to like, 3 or 4 apricots *per 500ml bottle*, by the way. The fruit character is absurdly fresh—the beer even LOOKS like liquefied apricot. But underneath the fruit, there's also a wonderfully well-developed sour beer. Tartness is medium-high



and exquisitely integrated—it's very difficult to say exactly where lactic sourness ends and the fruity acid begins. Funk and oak can be found if you're really searching on the back end, but what it will really leave you pondering is the juicy flavor of stone fruit, both apricot and peach. Residual sweetness is right where it needs to be—Golden Angel isn't bone dry; it presents its fruit flavors in the truest way possible. In the course of this tasting, we didn't taste anything else that put forth a more perfect synthesis of sour beer and fruit. That's why Wicked Weed is walking away with the crown—between the Golden Angel and Recurrant, they staked a serious claim as one of, if not the best sour brewery in the country.



Wicked Weed Brewing Pernicious IPA

City: Asheville, NC

ABV: 7.3%

The verdict: 2015's GABF silver medalist is an angular, focused IPA that zeroes in on a specific flavor profile and then just executes the hell out of it. Clean, distinctive, expressive citrus is the name of the game on the nose here, a tandem of classic grapefruit and tangerine hops that gains just a little bit more richness from an initially hidden touch of pineapple. Still, this is quite a dry IPA compared to some of the other finalists, with a moderate, drying bitterness that makes it very food-friendly. Malt flavors are very minimal, best imagined as a stage for grassy and citrus hop flavors to perform upon. It's like something you would drink alongside the best ceviche you've ever had in your life at a little oceanside restaurant, while feeling energetic enough afterward to frolic in the surf. Yes, I realize that's kind of a weird tasting note. Alternate note: It would probably make a killer beermosa.



Wicked Weed Pompoen

City: Asheville, NC

ABV: 7.2%

The verdict: And speaking of pumpkin sours ... this is much closer to the beer you'd probably be expecting when you saw the Wicked Weed name on the bottle. Aged in rum barrels with "charred ginger," it feels a bit like the *Star Trek* mirror universe evil twin of Firestone's beer—you know, in a good way. There's a serious melange of unusual flavors going on here—pronounced ginger, molasses, red fruit and even a bit of grapey character that confounded us at first. It really does feel like a sour made for a season of colder nights, perhaps the sort of thing you'd drink out on the back patio in a turtleneck. The *brettanomyces* on this one don't contribute a ton of funk, but they do their thing by adding layers of spicy complexity to a moderately tart barrel-aged beer that already wasn't hurting for character. This is a beer that you should hand to someone, tell them it's "a pumpkin ale" and watch the confusion spread across their face as they realize it tastes unlike any pumpkin beer they've ever sampled before.



Wicked Weed Brewing Recurrant

City: Asheville, NC

ABV: 7.7%

The verdict: "If this is what currants taste like, then I want to eat them every day," wrote one taster, and that's a pretty apt summation of this distinctive, elegant beer from Wicked Weed. Light on the funk but generous with the tartness, it expresses the currants through a wonderful, off-dry mixed berry fruitiness—like blackberry, raspberry, but also something a little more earthier and harder to place. Balance was clearly a goal, and the tasting notes reflect this—almost all of them comment on the integration between fruit, tart and the underlying amber sour beer. Oak is present, but definitely on the subtle side, presumably due to aging in larger "puncheon" barrels with less surface area in contact with the beer. A very well-conceived and executed sour that we were happy to see incorporate a fruit not found in any of the other entries.

Advertisement

Jim Vorel is Paste's resident craft beer guru. You can [follow him on Twitter](#) for much more beer coverage.

 Share

 Tweet

 Submit

 Pin

 More

Tags [asheville](#) [craft beer](#) [north carolina](#) [north carolina beer](#)

Recently in Drink



5 Mezcal Cocktails for Cinco de Mayo and Beyond



Dine-and-Date: 5 Cayman Restaurants to Enjoy Romantic Island Life



5 Bourbon Cocktails for Spring

More from Best north carolina beers

Features



Best Damn Beer Road Trip: Blue Ridge Parkway



October 15, 2014

Lists



20 of the Best North Carolina Beers

April 18, 2017

© 2017 Paste Media Group. All Rights Reserved