

## LV Style Guides: American Amber, Red & Brown Ales

*Today, we're going to talk about some seriously uncool beer styles: American amber ale, American red ale and American brown ale. Well, I don't think they're uncool, but everyone else seems to. These are the beer styles that introduced many of us to the world of craft beer. When they popped up in the 1980s and 90s, they were shocking to those that had only ever drunk mass-market light lagers—they were dark, full of body, and—gasp—flavorful! On that basis alone, these beers would be worthy of recognition in this weird corner of the internet, but thankfully, they've not been entirely forgotten. With the help of craft brewers everywhere and a rising interest in beer's role at the dinner table, these beers might actually be getting cool again.*

### Some Background

To think of American pales, ambers, reds, and browns as entirely distinct styles isn't totally accurate. These are beers with interwoven histories, similarities in flavor, and overlap in recipes.

It all started with [American pale ale](#)—a fresh take on the golden to copperish pale ales of England, produced with American ingredients. The beers were innovative and (sometimes) tasty, but the name was confusing to some consumers—this stuff was darker in color than the Budweisers they were used to, so the “pale” nomenclature seemed a bit misleading. Thus, brewers embraced the names “amber” or “red” to describe beers that were closer to those colors due to their use of darker malts.

Born of the same stock, American pales, ambers, and reds have always been closely related in every way. Each is typically built on American pale malt, with some supplementary malts for depth of flavor, added body, and color. These beers are also known for hoppy aromatics and bitterness, which provide contrast to malty sweetness and offer an enjoyably floral, citrusy scent.

American brown ales are also related to these beer styles, but are undeniably their own animal. These were similarly inspired by the English tradition, incorporating flavors that would be somewhat familiar to lovers of English brown ales, dark milds, and brown porters, again with an American twist.

They are likewise typically made from American malt, but the specialty grains that give these beers their deeper color can offer intense caramelly, chocolatey, coffeelike, toasty, or ashy flavor that you wouldn't find in American pale ales, reds or ambers. If those beers are fairly balanced drinks with a slight emphasis on hoppiness, American browns are fairly balanced with a slight emphasis on maltiness. Make no mistake--there's hoppiness here too, but these are generally more malt-focused beers.

As a whole, this family of styles is a bit more approachable than some of the other beers bearing the “American” name, which are often high in alcohol or bitterness. This approachability can be a powerful tool when introducing craft beer to new drinkers, who may be intrigued by beer with flavor, but could be put off by intense bitterness, sourness, or alcoholic heat.

Their balance also helps them shine at the dinner table. The caramelized, toasty, and roasty malts that give American ambers, reds, and browns their color are especially friendly with the roasted foods of fall and winter, with which they'll find some similarities in caramelized, browned flavor. The beers' moderate alcohol (think 5-6ish% ABV) and bitterness allows them to stand up to roasted, grilled, or braised red meats or stews without totally dominating roasted root vegetables, mushrooms, or more delicate fried foods. You can drink them with pot pie around the fireplace in February and with burgers and ribs in July.

### The Styles Today

Of course, American beer styles are constantly evolving. Craft beer experimentation is at an all-time high, and these stalwart styles are not excluded from the innovation. Brewers are playing around with all kinds of variants of these beers—you'll see imperial red ales that focus on intense hop flavor, super-strong brown ales that kick alcohol levels into the 8-10% range, and additive-heavy ambers bearing the flavors of added coffee and chocolate or even bacon or peanut butter. The future is bright—and maybe even cool—for American red, amber, and brown ales.