LV Style Guides: American Pale Ale

In the last edition of LVEd, we followed the complicated history of craft beer's hottest style, the IPA. But IPA wasn't cool until it came to the US, where the hop oils flow like the salmon of Capistrano. You see, in many ways, the modern American craft beer movement started when American brewers started using American ingredients to make English beer styles (especially pale ale) their own. Thankfully, this history is much easier to follow than that of those old British styles…

Some Background
Beer has been with us here in the United States since the colonizers first set foot on this pretty chunk of land. Heck, long before that, the Native Americans were almost certainly making grain-based alcoholic beverages. Beer is a part of the earliest history of the United States; George Washington himself can even be listed amongst the nation's early homebrewers, having famously written down a beer recipe in his diary.

As our country grew, waves of German and British immigrants built powerful companies making their respective lagers and ales alongside other new American folks getting their hands grainy. You may have heard of a few of these guys: Eberhard Anheuser, Adolphus Busch, Frederick Miller, Joseph Schlitz, Gary Pabstblüeribbon (okay, that last guy wasn't real). The American beer industry was thriving. But somehow, somewhere along the line, our love affair with beer turned sour.

Amidst the increasingly visible successes of the temperance movement from the mid-1800s on, the United States beer scene steadily grew to include nearly 1,500 active breweries by 1910. Prohibition did its thing from 1920 to 1932, and by the time that had finished, those 1,500 breweries were cut in number by more than half. The strongest of the breweries that remained grew stronger in the wake of the destruction. By 1978, the remaining 700 or so breweries of the mid-1930s had collapsed or consolidated down to a total of just 89.

The decades that followed Prohibition were dark times for American beer. The American people had developed a taste for light, adjunct-laden lagers, and the super powerful breweries that made them continued to dominate. Big beer flavor was not of much interest to many drinkers.

But the seeds of change had been planted in 1965, when Fritz Maytag purchased the Anchor Brewing Company in San Francisco. There, he produced California's indigenous steam beer style and found success by slowly developing an interesting portfolio of flavorful beers. In 1975, Anchor released Liberty Ale, an English-ish pale ale dry-hopped with American-grown Cascade hops. It weighed in at a rippin' 47 IBUs, making it extraordinarily hoppy for the time. There's some debate as to whether this beer should be called an American pale ale or an American IPA, since neither term really existed when the beer was created, but we'll save that discussion for a lazy conversation over a pint or two. Whatever you call them, Liberty, Steam, and the other early beers of Anchor helped inspire a generation of new brewers.

The most influential brewery to come of this next generation is undoubtedly the Sierra Nevada Brewing Company. This is a brewery that built their name, reputation, and eventual ubiquity around this new American pale ale style, finding quick success with Sierra Nevada Pale Ale, a beer driven by hoppy aromatics. It was a new taste to much of the country, and the American hunger for hops has only increased in the decades that have followed its 1981 release. Citrusy and floral hoppy beers began to define a new American craft beer movement.

The Style Today
Though our interest in hoppy beers hasn't since waned, American tastes within the category have certainly evolved. Anchor Liberty Ale and Sierra Nevada Pale Ale have firm malty bases upon which their Cascade-derived aromatics are showcased. Since the release of these beers and their explosion in popularity, American pale ales have, as a whole, gotten drier, paler, and more diverse in their hop profiles. Most examples live in the 4-6.5% ABV range and focus primarily on hoppy aroma. Ultra-juicy, highly fruity examples emphasizing a heavy hand of dry hops are particularly en vogue at the moment.

Any variety of hops you can think of have made their way into American pale ales, including many that didn't exist in the 70s and 80s when the aforementioned beers found their footing in the market. Aroma descriptors now extend beyond Cascade's grapefruity, floral, and pine-like to include terms like: lush, tangerine-like, stone fruit-like, tropical, oniony, and pungently marijuana-like. New hop varieties are being developed within the United States that are pushing those descriptors even further.

But our interest in American pale ale hops is not restricted to American varieties (though the style name begins to lose its logical footing as you leave the country). Varieties new and old from New Zealand, South Africa, Germany, and Australia are all gaining popularity for the potent juiciness they can offer to American pale ale and IPA. It's a hoppy world we're living in, and for that, we can thank American pale ale.