

LV Style Guides: Saison

Saison was originally made by farmers as a drink to sustain workers throughout the planting and harvesting seasons. It's a quaint and oft-repeated tale—one that inspires appropriately pastoral tasting notes of barnyards, hay, and freshly-cut grass. But the farmer/brewers of yore weren't exactly producing pristine bottles of Saison Dupont on their old timey brewing systems. So how did we get where we are today?

Some Backstory

Saison was indeed first produced on farms, which is why it and examples of the somewhat related bière de garde style are often referred to as “farmhouse ales.” Early saison brewers were located in Wallonia, the French-speaking southern half of Belgium, and the name “saison” comes from the French word for “season.” This is a reference to the highly seasonal nature of the beer's brewing and consumption; life on a farm can be a bit boring after the fall harvest, and brewing offered winter-time work, a way to use surplus grain, and year-round hydration when water couldn't always be trusted.

These were beers of utility, not necessarily of artistry or craft. They were made with pretty much whatever ingredients were available, and thus expressed a wide range of character. Any saison may have had a smooth snappiness from the use of wheat, an earthy undercurrent of rye flavor, potent punches of spices, or sourness from bacterial fermentation. In its early days, saison was more of a cultural tradition than a quantifiable beer style.

So What *is* Saison?

These days, many saisons are modeled after (or at least inspired by) a singular example of the style. Brasserie Dupont's Saison Dupont has spawned enough imitators to qualify as a sort of prototype for modern examples of the saison style. It's moderately strong at 6.5% ABV, very dry, hoppy, pale straw in color, and driven by yeasty aromatics. Many saisons exhibit similar characteristics.

Of course, if *every* saison tasted like Dupont's, it'd be a boring style. Thankfully, modern saison is considerably more varied. It remains one of the most dynamic, interesting styles in beer. Brewers from every corner of the world have made saisons that are super strong, very low in intensity, black, brown, red, barrel-aged, or sour, with fruit, spices, or coffee added...and that's just the tip of the iceberg.

With that in mind, the lines that define saison in a *practical* sense are rather blurry. In general, you can count on these being beers that exhibit an assertive yeast presence. “Rustic” is a word that's thrown around a lot in reference to saison's yeast character. The strains of yeast used to ferment saison tend to produce high levels of both esters and phenols, flavors that may be considered inappropriate in other styles. What this means is that even if there are no fruits or spices added to the saison in your hand, it may taste like there have been. The esters found in saisons tend to taste like apples, pears, bananas, or Juicy Fruit gum, and saison's phenols tend to taste a bit like cloves, peppercorns, or plastic.

Fermentation character is the name of the game with saison, but it remains a style with flexible boundaries. And hey—those are the most fun anyway, right?