

## What's the Difference Between Stout and Porter?

*We get asked this question a lot. Commercially produced examples of these styles exhibit a huge amount of overlap in character—there isn't a palate in the world that can always tell them apart. This is a tough fact to swallow for some. We drinkers want to be able to grab a porter off the shelf and know how it's going to be different from the stout that we passed up. It isn't that easy. Thankfully, there are some generalizations that we can apply to these styles that will push us in the right direction. We'll get to that later. For now, let's figure out how we got here...*

### The Origin

Let's start with the word "stout." Back in the 1700s, there was no such thing as a beer style called "stout." The word was just an adjective used to describe something strong and thick. In England, it became a common practice to stick that word in front of beer styles to indicate that the beer being described was a bit stronger or richer than you might expect from its style. It was a bit like how we use the words "imperial" or "double" today.

### The Divide

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, one beer style dominated England: porter. As was the trend, the strongest porters were sometimes referred to as stout porters, and over time, they became common enough that the full name wasn't necessary. Folks could order a stout and the bartender would understand what they wanted. This created a divide. There were now stouts and there were porters—similar beers, but with a distinction of strength. By the early 1900s, the beers bearing each name were independently evolving and stout and porter were seen as entirely separate styles. Pale ale was overtaking porter as the dominant beer of the day, and breweries embraced stouts as the dark beer to hang their hat on. In their state of decreasing popularity, porters began to fall off in quality. Seen as a weak, nasty-tasting beer for old men, porter nearly went extinct. It wasn't until the last few decades that it's seen a resurgence in popularity.

### Where Are We Now?

These days, both stout and porter are commonly brewed around the world. But if someone were to drink through every example, he or she wouldn't be able to form a hard set of rules differentiating the two—it certainly wouldn't be worth the hangover. All that drinking *would* lead to a couple observations, though. Generally speaking, modern porters and stouts both have some degree of roasty bitterness that can taste like coffee or burnt bread. In porters, this character is *generally* softer than in stouts, but there are aggressively roasty porters and surprisingly gentle stouts in the market. Porters are *generally* a bit lower in alcohol than stouts, but there are some super strong examples out there too. In practice, it's pretty much up to the brewer to choose what he or she would like to call a beer. Tradition, inspiration, and marketing can all influence that decision.

### All Hope is Not Lost

Thankfully, there is a range of sub-styles within each bigger style that can help you make your purchasing decisions. Each has a tendency to exhibit certain characteristics and understanding them will help you know what you're buying. Here are a few of the most common:

#### Stouts

*Dry Stout:* Little sweetness, lots of roasty bitterness, usually low in alcohol.

*Oatmeal Stout:* Brewed with a small portion of oats in addition to barley. Creamy, nutty, smooth.

*Milk/Sweet Stout:* Brewed with lactose sugar. Sweeter, less bitter, fuller in body.

*Imperial Stout:* Big on roasty bitterness and alcohol. Intense.

#### Porters

*Brown Porter:* Mildly roasty, caramelly, milk chocolaty, toasty.

*Robust Porter:* Richer, roastier, fuller in body, stronger.

*Baltic Porter:* Typically made with lager yeast, this tastes quite different from other porters. Malty, smooth, and dense. Usually not very bitter.