



Feature

Deck Your Great Lakes Christmas Ale with a Cinnamon Sugar Rim

December 20, 2018

Two words announce the arrival of winter in Northeast Ohio. No, it's not "Go Browns," but it is something that makes you feel better about rooting for them: Christmas Ale.

In the decades since Great Lakes Brewing Company began brewing their Christmas Ale in 1992, it's reached cult status in and around Cleveland. Brewed with locally sourced honey and layered with spicy cinnamon and ginger, it's a perfect holiday beer for decking the halls in any season... even July.

A sip of the Yuletide brew floods is filled with memories of cozy sweaters, crackling fireplaces, old friends, and snow day hangovers thanks to its 7.5% ABV. In Ohio, as well as parts of Pennsylvania and Michigan, Christmas Ale is as ubiquitous during the holidays as A Christmas Story marathons, which was filmed just two miles from the Ohio City brewery.

Christmas Ale season begins in late October and runs through the holidays. According to Great Lakes representative Adam Ritterspach, a pint of Christmas Ale is poured every six seconds for 12 hours straight during the brewery's First Pour kickoff event.

"The palate first welcomes fresh cinnamon and ginger, but the flavors and aromas are pleasantly restrained without venturing into 'spice bomb' territory," Ritterspach says. "A mix of roasted barley keeps each sip toasty, while Mt. Hood and Cascade hops balance the sweet and subtle floral notes of the honey."



But some Christmas Ale fans play Sugar Plum Fairy by adding a cinnamon sugar rim to the draft glass. The sweet crystals cling to the rim like ice to the shore of Lake Erie. The best part of this sweet trend might be the mystery surrounding it. Great Lakes didn't start the practice nor do they know how it started. "We're pretty sure we first started hearing about the practice sometime in the mid to late-90's. Fans have been adding a cinnamon sugar rim for at least 15 years, but likely longer," Ritterspach says.

For Detroit-Shoreway neighborhood donut bar Brewnuts, it's a fitting addition to iconic ale. Owners Shelley and John Pippin infuse local craft beers into the dough or glaze of handmade donuts. Brewnuts also boasts a bar featuring 16 local taps, including Christmas Ale for about two months each winter. According to Shelley Pippin, a majority of Christmas Ale drinkers opt for a cinnamon sugar rim. "Since we are a donut bar, dessert beer options always pair well with our menu," she says.

In a bar that highlights sweets and indulgence, the cinnamon sugar rim elevates the Christmas Ale experience when paired with a donut. "We make our own honey sugar syrup and spiced brown sugar blend, so we play up the notes of the holiday spices present in the beer," says Pippin. "We feel that it enhances those flavors and makes the experience feel a bit more special."



Another Cleveland icon, gourmet grilled cheese restaurant Melt Bar and Grilled, has been offering the cinnamon sugar rim to Christmas Ale drinkers since opening in 2006. "It was not widely offered back then," says founder Matt Fish. "It was a good draw and attraction since we were one of the only places offering it."

The cinnamon sugar rim stretches to all ten of Melt's locations, including Columbus and Dayton. Melt's Regional Beverage Manager, Vicki Andes, says that Melt goes through around 30 kegs of Christmas Ale in a season with 75% of drinkers enjoying the cinnamon sugar rim. "It brings out the cinnamon, clove, nutmeg and honey in the beer," says Andes. "The rim adds to the flavor of the beer and really makes it feel like the holiday season!"

Great Lakes however, skips the cinnamon sugar rim at their brewpub. According to Ritterspach, adding more ingredients to the complex, carefully balanced brew risks overwhelming the flavor profile and affecting the quality and longevity of the beer head. They do encourage adding Christmas Ale to your favorite holiday dishes, offering recipes like Christmas Ale gingerbread cookies and Christmas Ale Pumpkin pie on their website.

While Christmas Ale fans hunt for the coveted draft around the country, the cinnamon sugar rim seems to be a uniquely Ohio offering. Great Lakes says they won't bah humbug how customers choose to enjoy their Christmas Ale at home on their own. "If it's served fresh and consumed responsibly, we're happy," Ritterspach says. In that case, add a shot of vanilla vodka to your next pint and have yourself a white Christmas.



By Jessica Milmaric

Falling For Beer

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