

BILLINGS

BEER OR BUST

BY MARK STOCK





There's a lot to taste on Montana's Rocky Mountain beer circuit —
just don't stop before you reach the state's largest city

By All Means

Beer and Montana are no strangers. Towns like Missoula and Bozeman have been turning out quality pilsners, pales and IPAs for decades. But as you navigate east over the Continental Divide and down the backside of the mighty Rocky Mountains, do not stop until you get to Billings.

That's because the state's largest city has a healthy craft beer scene as well. Sure, it doesn't experience the hype that places like Bend and Boise do, but maybe that's a perk. Finding a refreshing beer here is a simple, downright effortless pleasure, whether you're wrapping up a day on the trail or about to cast for some wild trout. You can enjoy a great baltic porter when winter drags into April and May, as it so often does. And when summer finally comes, there are amazing adjuncts — perhaps most famously, huckleberries — that make for great fruited beers.

If you revere beer, Billings needs to be on your radar. So as you get ready for road trips in the Wild West this season, go a little farther east, young reader, and get yourself some of the most exciting beers in the region.

"We don't have a lot of contrivance or hype beers in Billings," says Tim Schnars II, director of brewing and distilling operations at **MEADOWLARK BREWING AND SPIRITS** in Billings. "There's plenty of experimentation going on, but the methods and processing are still steeped in tradition. Thankfully, nobody is brewing with Count Chocula or Snickers bars."

Which is not to say that Meadowlark and other Montana breweries aren't pushing the envelope. As Schnars says, they're all about pushing science forward. Launched in Sidney, Montana, in 2014, Meadowlark opened its 24,000-square foot, 28-tap brewing center in Billings this past August. "We were the first craft malt certified brewery in Montana and we've become a vanguard of sorts for malt barley strains like Buzz and single origin Brewski, as well as the interesting malts being made by local craft maltsters from these strains," he says.



Visit Billings, By All Means

It doesn't stop there, as his team is experimenting in very geeky, very intriguing ways. "Right now, we're playing with yeasts modified with CRISPR, producing clean sours and beers that produce heavy thiol concentrations," he says. "Normally sours take months to produce and require bacterial infection. Now we can brew one in a little under two weeks.

Thiol-producing yeasts help create bright tropical fruit flavors like guava, grapefruit and passionfruit, without any actual fruit or hops being added.

Schnars says he's most proud of Fungus Shui, an ale brewed with candy cap mushrooms. "We picked up a gold medal at the Great American Beer Festival with it and it consistently brings that 'wow' factor to public engagement," he says. "It really helps illustrate that beer has a wide range and depth of possibilities."

The location of Billings likely has something to do with its beer-friendly nature. As Schnars points out, his town is in close proximity to the malt basket. "Montana and North Dakota [provide] the bulk of malted barley and wheat production, and being so close affords us access to the freshest malts, malt scientists and even single-origin malts," he says. The mineral-rich water of the Rocky Mountains is an added bonus.

OFF THE BEATEN PATH

If you're trekking through Montana, by all means, taste your way through the many beer-centric towns along scenic Interstate 90. Just don't stop before you reach Billings, as the town is well on its way in helping to define the latest generation of the great Rocky Mountain beer circuit. Ask around, get off the beaten path, and quench your thirst for craft. It's that kind of spirit that's propped the Billings beer scene up in the first place and has us excited for the future. Here's where to grab a bar stool in beer-friendly Billings.



Billings Brew Trail



By All Means

Set in a modern facility, By All Means is home to a brewing lab and proudly proclaims to have a mad scientist's approach to making beer. The nearly 7,000-square-foot lab is where the magic happens and includes stacks of wood *foeders* for aging beers as well as a canning line. The label is beloved for its aged sours, along with witbiers, fresh-hop IPAs, and even smoothie IPAs. Inquire about ongoing experiments and what's currently available by the can, as the lab crew is always turning out something of interest, from cold and double-black IPAs to fruited goses and Nordic saisons.



Canyon Creek Brewing

Part of the original guard, Canyon Creek Brewing got its start more than two decades ago. Brewer Ron Kalvig developed a local following with his garage creations before a proper brewing facility opened its doors at the end of 2013. Canyon Creek covers the spectrum, turning out everything from summer-approved blonde ales and hefeweizens to reds, German alt beers and milk stouts. The cozy space features a pair of bars and patios and a fetching outdoor fireplace.

Great hops are just a state or two away, meaning they can come in fresh and at their peak when the time comes. In-state, serious brewing programs have bubbled up at schools all over, from Montana State University Billings to the University of Montana in Missoula. And that's to say nothing of the incredible outdoors-y culture here, which tends to love a well-made lager as much as a float down a freestone river or a hike to a mountain peak.

There are other notable players in town, of course, and there will likely be many more to come in the future. Smaller western towns like this are booming at the moment, in the wake of a pandemic that shook the American psyche and has us dreaming of small-town life again. Many people, talented beer industry types included, have been priced out of the bigger metro areas, making many of the inland towns new hubs for exciting food and drinks. Others have flocked here as part of the latest work-from-home movement.

Like many American cities, Billings has its own official route devoted to craft suds, the **BILLINGS BREW TRAIL**. It includes a half dozen options, along with a pair of distilleries and a cider house, all within a walkable expanse. (There's also a fun map from the **MONTANA BREWERS ASSOCIATION** if you want to extend your stay.) But there are great options beyond these trails too, especially on the western reaches of town. ●



Carter's Brewery

► Carter's Brewery is a family-run joint that's been at it since 2007. They've earned an audience in town and are featured on tap lists at many area restaurants and bars. When you go to the brewery, check out their many German-inspired beers, like a maibock made entirely from Montana-grown hops and malts. The Ghost Train Double IPA is a heady sipper while the Handcar Hefeweizen captures the essence of spring in a glass, a brightly colored brew bursting with citrus and fresh fruit notes.



Uberbrew

► Smack dab in the heart of town on historic Montana Avenue, Uberbrew is a must for craft beer enthusiasts. There's plenty that pops off the menu, like a gose rested in tequila and Grand Marnier barrels, or a cream stout made with local beans from MoAV Coffee. Hopheads will find a lot to like, with IPAs ranging from cloudy and tropical to decidedly West Coast. Be on the lookout for interesting rotating beers and order a bison burger or some elk sausage to accompany your brews.



Thirsty Street Brewing

► Thirsty Street Brewing is a short walk from Carter's and Uberbrew, which should come as no surprise, given that owner Shea Dawson is the genius behind the 1.5-mile Billings Brew Trail. Thirsty Street has two stops on the trail: a taproom and bottle shop, as well as the Garage, where the beers are brewed and the barrel-aged sours are conditioned. The Garage also serves as a live music venue that features acts from Billings and beyond.