



VIENNA LAGER



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BY GORDON STRONG

VIENNA LAGER

Once one of the major lager styles, it has all but died out in its homeland, or has changed into something nearly unrecognizable.

VIENNA LAGER BY THE NUMBERS

OG:1.048–1.055
FG:1.010–1.014
SRM: 9–15
IBU: 18–30
ABV: 4.7–5.5%



Although Mozart predates Vienna lager by about a half century, they both contribute to the imagery of elegance and culture of Vienna during the post-Renaissance times before the World Wars. Located in the eastern part of Austria on the Danube River near the border with the Czech Republic, Vienna is due east of Munich and southeast of Plzeň (Pilsen) – the three cities forming the golden triangle of lager development in central Europe in the mid-1800s. It was here that the quintessential amber lager was born.

As with many beer styles, it has had its ups and downs throughout its history. Once one of the major lager styles, it has all but died out in its homeland, or has changed into something nearly unrecognizable. Adapted to the new world by Austrian emigrants, it became popular in Mexico and the United States. While continuing to change in North America, it also regained traction as part of the general rediscovery of classic beer styles during the craft beer era.

Vienna lager is style 7A in the BJCP (Beer Judge Certification Program) Style Guidelines, and is in the Amber Bitter European Beer category along with altbier. This category is for balanced to bitter amber-colored German or Austrian beers and should not be taken to imply that the two styles are in any other way related. Vienna lager is a bottom-fermented, lagered beer with toasty malt flavor and clean hop bitterness in almost equal balance.

HISTORY

The origins of Vienna lager are fairly well-documented as styles go, although there seems to be a bit of speculation and inference involved. Anton Dreher was a Viennese brewer who studied with Gabriel Sedlmayr in Munich in the 1830s. They seem to have jointly discovered that yeast was the secret ingredient in monastic

brewing at the time and began trying to use that in their beers. Sedlmayr at Spaten and Dreher at Schwechat introduced their amber lagers – Märzen and Vienna lager, respectively – in 1841. This is a year before golden lagers were first created in Pilsen.

In the early days, Sedlmayr focused on developing the Märzen and Oktoberfest process of brewing at the end of the season and lagering a beer over the summer to be served at a fall festival. This continued until the 1860s when refrigeration was introduced into the brewing process and the styles became practical to make year-round. Dreher began using refrigeration in 1868. Vienna lagers began to diverge from Märzen/Oktoberfest in that they became lower in gravity and were served as everyday beers, not higher-alcohol festival beers.

At the start of the 20th century, Vienna, Pilsner, and Munich beers were brewed on a regular basis, and with Dortmunder, were the most popular lager styles of the day. The effects of two World Wars did not help the beer. In 1948, de Clerck wrote that the beer was of inferior quality and had almost disappeared from the market. A far cry from the earlier “Viennese character” that was so praised for elegance and quality. Examples I remember trying in the 1990s, such as Gösser Dark, seemed excessively sweet and caramelly. Michael Jackson wrote in 1997 that when he first described the classic style in 1977, that Viennese brewers accused him of making up the style since it was so different from what they were then making.

While the style may be hard to find in Austria today, it did spawn a derivative in the neighboring Czech Republic – Czech amber lager. This version shows the Czech national character of brewing and is thus hoppier and often maltier. It has changed enough that it is a separate style, but it is a continental version

VIENNA LAGER

(5 gallons/19 L, all-grain)
OG = 1.051 FG = 1.012
IBU = 19 SRM = 12
ABV = 5.2%



INGREDIENTS

3.5 lbs. (1.6 kg) Pilsner malt
4 lbs. (1.8 kg) Vienna malt
1.75 lbs. (794 g) dark Munich malt
(9 °L)
1.5 lbs. (680 g) Caravienne malt
(20 °L)
1 oz. (28 g) Carafo® Special III malt
5 AAU Styrian Golding hops (60 min.)
(1 oz./28 g at 5% alpha acids)
1.5 AAU Saaz hops (10 min.)
(0.5 oz./14 g at 3% alpha acids)
Wyeast 2124 (Bohemian Lager),
White Labs WLP830 (German
Lager), or SafLager W-34/70 yeast
¾ cup corn sugar (if priming)

STEP BY STEP

This recipe uses reverse osmosis (RO) water. Adjust all brewing water to a pH of 5.5 using phosphoric acid. Add 1 tsp. of calcium chloride to the mash.

This recipe uses a step mash. Use enough water to have a moderately thick mash (1.5 qts./lb. or 3.1 L/kg). Mash in the Pilsner, Vienna, and dark Munich malts at 131 °F (55 °C) and hold for 10 minutes. Raise the temperature to 146 °F (63 °C) and hold for 40 minutes. Raise the temperature to 158 °F (70 °C) and hold for 20 minutes.

Begin recirculating, add the Caravienne and Carafo® Special malts, raise the mash temperature to 169 °F (76 °C), and recirculate for 15 minutes.

Sparge slowly and collect 6.5 gallons (24.5 L) of wort.

Boil the wort for 90 minutes, adding hops at the times indicated in the recipe.

Chill the wort to 50 °F (10 °C), pitch the yeast, and ferment until complete. Rack to secondary and lager for 2 months at 32 °F (0 °C).

Rack the beer, prime and bottle condition, or keg and force carbonate.

VIENNA LAGER

(5 gallons/19 L,
extract with grains)
OG = 1.051 FG = 1.012
IBU = 19 SRM = 12
ABV = 5.2%



INGREDIENTS

3.3 lbs. (1.5 kg) light liquid malt
extract
2.75 lbs. (1.25 kg) liquid Munich malt
extract
1.5 lbs. (680 g) Caravienne malt
(20 °L)
1 oz. (28 g) Carafo® Special III malt
5 AAU Styrian Golding hops (60 min.)
(1 oz./28 g at 5% alpha acids)
1.5 AAU Saaz hops (10 min.)
(0.5 oz./14 g 3% alpha acids)
Wyeast 2124 (Bohemian Lager),
White Labs WLP830 (German
Lager), or SafLager W-34/70 yeast
¾ cup corn sugar (if priming)

STEP BY STEP

Use 6.5 gallons (24.5 L) of water in the brew kettle; heat to 158 °F (70 °C).

Turn off the heat. Add the Caravienne and Carafo® Special malts in a mesh bag and steep for 30 minutes. Remove and rinse grains gently.

Add the malt extracts and stir thoroughly to dissolve completely. Turn the heat back on and bring to a boil.

Boil the wort for 60 minutes, adding hops at the times indicated.

Chill the wort to 50 °F (10 °C), pitch the yeast, and ferment until complete. Rack to secondary and lager for 2 months at 32 °F (0 °C).

Rack the beer, prime and bottle condition, or keg and force carbonate.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

You really don't want any sharp

edges, so resist the urge to make this style of beer too hoppy, bitter, or boozy. When it comes to fermentation, you don't want fruitiness or rough edges from a hasty fermentation and lagering. Slow and low is the goal to produce the elegance this beer deserves.

“The beer should have a nearly even balance between malt flavor and hop bitterness — neither should dominate.”

that does show its roots.

The decline of the Austrian Empire caused some Viennese brewers to immigrate to the Americas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Santiago Graf was one of the first to arrive in Mexico, and began lager brewing in 1882 under the name Toluca y Mexico. Some brewers also settled in the U.S. Southwest. These brewers adapted their classic style to indigenous ingredients and helped introduce amber lagers to North America. Brewing was impacted by Prohibition in the U.S. and the Revolution in Mexico, which led to the rise of a pale, less flavorful style as the dominant lager.

The craft beer era helped reintroduce the style to American brewers and in other countries today inspired by craft. Michael Jackson's *World Guide to Beer* mentioned it in 1977 and sparked interest in the style in the 1980s. It fell somewhat out of favor in the 2000s as hoppy beers exploded, but saw an upswing in the late 2010s as specialty lager breweries became more popular.

Modern Mexican versions are likely somewhat lighter in body and palate than the originals, and many modern American amber lagers are surely inspired by these adaptations. Early attempts to categorize amber lagers often were hampered by trying to collect them all into one common style. Today, international amber lager better describes the lighter, less flavorful, or less bitter modern examples, while Vienna lager is reserved for the pre-World Wars style as rediscovered in the craft era.

SENSORY PROFILE

Vienna lager is a standard-strength, amber-colored, continental lager beer of around 5% ABV. It should not have an alcohol edge, or be as strong as a festbier or bockbier. The color can range from a light reddish-amber

to a pale copper — basically, darker than gold and lighter than brown. Like most lagers, it should be bright and clear and have a large, persistent head — in this case, off-white in color. As an everyday beer, it should not be too heavy. A medium-light to medium body is appropriate, with moderate carbonation. As a lager, it should have a smooth mouthfeel.

The beer should have a nearly even balance between malt flavor and hop bitterness — neither should dominate. The malt is usually bready and toasty, but without sharp biscuity or heavily toasted flavors. It likewise should not display any roasted or burnt notes. Any caramel flavors are usually toffee-like and restrained. The beer should be malty but not sweet, and have a dry, well-attenuated finish. I think the best examples have a soft finish without any harsh or sharp bite. Bitterness levels are moderate, enough so that the finish does not seem sweet, but not enough that you think the aftertaste is hoppy.

Hop aroma and flavor are typically low and reflect the floral, spicy, or herbal noble-type hop varieties of continental Europe. The hop bitterness should be smooth, not harsh, and should complement the malt. The quality of the malt and hop flavors should seem high, with an elegant impression of the best flavors. No sharp edges, please. The fermentation should be clean, without esters and significant sulfur, and the beer should have a fresh character. Executed properly, this style is extremely drinkable.

BREWING INGREDIENTS AND METHODS

As a new brewer in the 1990s, I turned to the *Vienna, Märzen, Oktoberfest* style book by George and Laurie Fix for guidance. Unfortunately, their recipes were based on what ingredients were available in the early days of homebrewing, which weren't much. Fortunately, we (in the U.S.,

at least) now have access to a much broader selection that allows for more authentic flavors. The Fixes mention an elegant Viennese character to the beer, so high-quality ingredients are always most traditional.

Vienna malt (and Munich malt, in Munich) became the base for the new lager styles in the 1840s as the brewers sought to adapt what was making pale ale in the British Empire popular — lighter-colored, non-smoky, kilned malts. Vienna malt, a 2-row malt that falls between pale and Munich malt in terms of color, should make up a major portion of this style, although Pilsner and Munich malts are also common. I made a decocted version with 100% Vienna malt that approached a helles bock in flavor, so I tend to go for a varied malt grist to add a toastier flavor and to lighten the body.

Darker German Munich malts, in the 8–10 °L range, can be used to increase maltiness, but I would avoid malts that add a heavy toasted flavor, especially biscuity or nutty. Using some malts to increase the toffee or caramel flavors are OK, as long as they don't become sweet in the finish or dominant in the palate. The best examples show a rich, toasty maltiness with a slight caramel toffee flavor as an accent. Adaptations in the Americas might add adjuncts such as corn and dark malt for color, but these are not really authentic in the classic version.

Step-mashing to increase attenuation and lighten the body is preferred to a single infusion mash, which is not traditional. Decoction mashes can be employed, but I typically accomplish a similar effect by increasing the specialty malts a little bit. I find that step mashes give me the right combination of a malty palate and a dry finish that makes continental lagers so drinkable.

Noble-type hops are traditional in this central European style, and

fit in with the elegant impression. Anton Dreher was said to prefer Saaz hops, and also Styrian Golding. I think Hallertauer or Tettnanger are also acceptable, as are modern substitutes. Freshness matters, so I would choose very fresh domestic hops over older, but more authentic imported ones. These types of lagers do not have a big late-hop character, so a moderate addition some time in the last 15 or 20 minutes should suffice, along with a single bittering addition.

Traditional German fermentation and lagering methods can be used. Select a clean German lager yeast that is a low sulfur producer, ferment around 50 °F (10 °C), and lager up to 8 weeks near 32 °F (0 °C). Avoid sulfates in the water. Carbonates are OK if used to balance the acidity in the malt, but I prefer to use relatively low-ion water.

HOMEBREW EXAMPLE

Use good-quality continental European malts for this recipe. I like using Best and Weyermann malts, but I'd be happy to use other German or Belgian maltsters. When I mention dark Munich malt, I really mean Weyermann Munich Type 2. Different maltsters can make this malt darker, so I'm talking about a malt of around 8–10 °L in color. I've seen North American malts twice as dark called "Dark Munich" but they have a completely different flavor profile, much too heavily toasted.

The caramel-type malt could be Caravienne, Cara 20, CaraRed®, CaraAmber®, or another European light-crystal malt of around 20–25 °L. The Carafa® malt is just for color and should not add flavor (I have found slightly darker examples often score better in competitions, as long as they don't have any roasted flavor). Notice that I add the crystal and dark malt during the vorlauf. These malts don't need to be mashed, so just make sure they are in the mash long enough to be thoroughly rinsed (30 minutes between the vorlauf and the sparge is fine).

I'm using a step infusion mash to help attenuate the beer a little more. A decoction mash could certainly be used, and would be appropriate. Just try to have the conversion temperatures at the same steps as in the infusion mash

program. If you do select a decoction mash program, use either a single or double decoction, and eliminate the Carafa® Special malt from the recipe.

The hops are pretty straightforward for a continental lager. I'm going with the hops that were said to be Anton Dreher's favorites – Styrian Golding and Saaz. I think any noble-type hops could be substitutes for either bittering or flavor/aroma since this is not a heavily hopped style. I would just avoid any modern New World-type hops.

As an old school lager, an old school lager yeast is appropriate. The workhorse W34/70 yeast is great for malty styles without adding much additional flavor (or worse, sulfur). Wyeast 2124, White Labs WLP830, or the dry SafLager W-34/70 will all work. Ferment cool and lager it at least a month but preferably two. The water profile should be relatively neutral, again avoiding sulfur. If your water needs calcium, use calcium chloride to provide it.

Your goal here is a smooth, standard-strength malty beer with enough hop bitterness to match the malt. It should not be heavy on the palate or sweet in the finish, and if there is a light hop flavor, so much the better. Brewing this style properly can really be an exercise in restraint. (BYO)