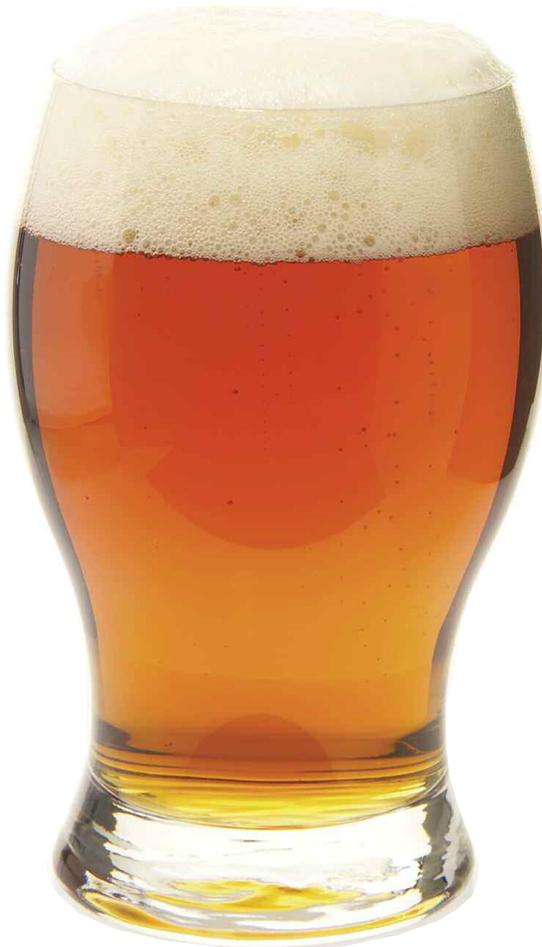


the best of  
**Brew**  
YOUR OWN

**CALIFORNIA  
COMMON**



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# California Common

by Jamil Zainasheff

**C**alifornia common is far from common on store shelves and at brewpubs. While you might find a few different examples with some searching, the most well known example of this style is Anchor Steam. During the California gold rush California common, or “steam beer,” was the inexpensive beer of the working class. It was found almost everywhere along the West Coast and was brewed by as many as 25 breweries in San Francisco alone. Over the course of more than 100 years, however, steam beer almost completely disappeared. By 1965, the Anchor Brewery of San Francisco was the only brewery still producing steam beer. It was about to close its doors for good when Fritz Maytag came along to save it and the steam beer that they had been brewing since 1896.

California common has a moderately rich malt character and a dry finish. The malt character is obvious, with bread, toast, caramel and slight graininess, but it is never heavy in flavor or aroma. The hop bittering is quite firm, balancing the beer decidedly bitter, but not overwhelmingly so. In the Anchor example, Northern Brewer hops play a big role. They provide a moderate to high level of woody (some people say rustic or minty) flavors and aromas. The hops also help the beer finish dry and firm. Mouthfeel is medium and can have a slightly creamy feel. The carbonation tends to be higher than the average American ale, around three volumes. While the beer has some subtle, light fruity esters from fermentation, it shouldn't be any more than a trace.

The Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP) uses the classic Anchor Steam to define this style, and that makes it one tough category in which to compete, as the judges are often focused on finding only Anchor Steam. Certainly, you can just try to

clone Anchor Steam, but that leaves little room for creativity. It would be better if judges looked for a variant of alt or German lager brewed under late 19th century conditions in California. With that sort of imagination, perhaps there would be more leeway in this category for creativity.

If you do want to brew something similar to the Anchor classic, it is best to focus on a fairly simple recipe. North American two-row or North American pale ale malt plus about 10% of a mid-color crystal malt would be all the grist you would need. Follow that up with Northern Brewer hops, California common yeast from White Labs or Wyeast, fermentation around the mid-60s, and you are all set. Some sources claim that Anchor Steam bears only a passing resemblance to historic steam beer, because historic steam beer was an adjunct-heavy (about a third) beer colored with caramel sugar. While steam beer may have become adjunct-heavy at some later point, it is likely that steam beer during its heyday was all malt, as is Anchor Steam today.

If you want to create your own example of the style, but still do well in competition, the safe thing is to try to play off a characteristic of the Anchor example, such as emphasizing the toasty, biscuit, or caramel character. You can also experiment with different hops, but I would avoid trying to play with the fermentation profile too much, as it is an important part of this style.

Historically, steam beer brewers used the local malt and hops available. In San Francisco, the malt would have been Bay Brewing barley, a six-row barley with plump kernels and low protein said to be similar to North American two-row today. You have several good options for your base malt: North American two-row, North American pale ale, or North American Pilsner malt. North

*Continued on page 3*

## CALIFORNIA COMMON by the numbers

**OG:** . . . 1.048–1.054 (11.9–13.3 °P)  
**FG:** . . . . . 1.011–1.014 (2.8–3.6 °P)  
**SRM:** . . . . . 10–14  
**IBU:** . . . . . 30–45  
**ABV:** . . . . . 4.5–5.5%



## Uncommon Common

(5 gallons/19 L, all-grain)

OG = 1.054 (13.3 °P)

FG = 1.016 (4.1 °P)

IBU = 41 SRM = 11 ABV = 5%

### Ingredients

9 lbs. (4.1 kg) Great Western North American two-row malt (or similar)  
17.6 oz. (500 g) Durst Munich malt (or similar)  
14.1 oz. (400 g) Great Western crystal malt 40 °L (or similar)  
7 oz. (200 g) Briess Victory® malt 28 °L (or similar)  
1.75 oz. (50 g) Crisp pale chocolate malt 200 °L (or similar)  
5 AAU Northern Brewer hops (0.77 oz./22 g of 6.5% alpha acids) (60 min.)  
8 AAU Northern Brewer hops (1.23 oz./35 g of 6.5% alpha acids) (15 min.)  
8 AAU Northern Brewer hops (1.23 oz./35 g of 6.5% alpha acids) (1 min.)  
White Labs WLP810 (San Francisco Lager) or Wyeast 2112 (California Lager) yeast

### Step by Step

Mill the grains and dough-in targeting a mash of around 1.5 quarts of water to 1 pound of grain (a liquor-to-grist ratio of about 3:1 by weight) and a temperature of 150 °F (66 °C). Hold the mash at 150 °F (66 °C) until enzymatic conversion is complete. Infuse the mash with near boiling water while stirring or with a recirculating mash system raise the temperature to mash out at 168 °F (76 °C). Sparge slowly with 170 °F (77 °C) water, collecting wort until the pre-boil kettle volume is around 5.9 gallons (22.3 L) and the gravity is 1.046 (11.4 °P).

The total wort boil time is 60 minutes. Add the bittering hops as soon as the wort starts boiling. Add the second hop addition and Irish moss or other finings with 15 minutes left. The last hop addition goes

in 1 minute before the end of the boil. Chill the wort rapidly to 62 °F (17 °C), let the break material settle, rack to the fermenter, pitch the yeast and aerate thoroughly. The proper pitch rate is 2.5 packages of liquid yeast or 1 package of liquid yeast in a 3-liter starter.

Ferment at 62 °F (17 °C) until the beer attenuates fully. With healthy yeast, fermentation should be complete within a week, but do not rush it. Rack to a keg and force carbonate or rack to a bottling bucket, add priming sugar, and bottle. Target a carbonation level of 2.5 to 3 volumes.

## Uncommon Common

(5 gallons/19 L, extract with grains)

OG = 1.054 (13.3 °P)

FG = 1.016 (4.1 °P)

IBU = 41 SRM = 11 ABV = 5%

### Ingredients

5.5 lbs. (2.5 kg) light liquid malt extract  
1 lb. (440 g) Munich liquid malt extract  
14.1 oz. (400 g) Great Western crystal malt 40 °L (or similar)  
7 oz. (200 g) Briess Victory® malt 28 °L (or similar)  
1.75 oz. (50 g) Crisp pale chocolate malt 200 °L (or similar)  
5 AAU Northern Brewer hops (0.77 oz./22 g of 6.5% alpha acids) (60 min.)  
8 AAU Northern Brewer hops (1.23 oz./35 g of 6.5% alpha acids) (15 min.)  
8 AAU Northern Brewer hops (1.23 oz./35 g of 6.5% alpha acids) (1 min.)  
White Labs WLP810 (San Francisco Lager) or Wyeast 2112 (California Lager) yeast

### Step by Step

Most Munich liquid malt extract (LME) is sold as a blend of Munich and Pilsner or two-row malts in different percentages. I specify 100%

Munich LME in my recipe so you will know how much of your blend to use for your brew. When using a blend, replace the Munich extract in the recipe and enough of the two-row extract to match the percentage of the blend. If you want to use 100% Munich extract, the only current supplier I am aware of is Weyermann. If you cannot get fresh liquid malt extract, it is better to use an appropriate amount of dried malt extract (DME) instead.

Mill or coarsely crack the specialty malt and place loosely in a grain bag. Avoid packing the grains too tightly in the bag, using more bags if needed. Steep the bag in about 1 gallon (~4 liters) of water at roughly 170 °F (77 °C) for about 30 minutes. Lift the grain bag out of the steeping liquid and rinse with warm water. Allow the bags to drip into the kettle for 15 minutes while you add the malt extract. Do not squeeze the bags. Add enough water to the steeping liquor and malt extract to make a pre-boil volume of 5.9 gallons (22.3 L) and a gravity of 1.046 (11.4 °P). Stir thoroughly and bring to a boil.

The total wort boil time is 60 minutes. Add the bittering hops as soon as the wort starts boiling. Add the second hop addition and Irish moss or other finings with 15 minutes left. The last hop addition goes in 1 minute before the end of the boil. Chill the wort rapidly to 62 °F (17 °C), let the break material settle, rack to the fermenter, pitch the yeast and aerate thoroughly. The proper pitch rate is 2.5 packages of liquid yeast or 1 package of liquid yeast in a 3-liter starter.

Ferment at 62 °F (17 °C) until the beer attenuates fully. With healthy yeast, fermentation should be complete within a week, but do not rush it. Rack to a keg and force carbonate or rack to a bottling bucket, add priming sugar, and bottle. Target a carbonation level of 2.5 to 3 volumes.

American two-row will give the beer a clean, subtle background malt character. North American pale ale malt adds a slightly richer background malt character, somewhat of a light bready, biscuit note. Pilsner malt lends a grainy malt character. You can use one of these base malts exclusively or blend them in any proportion you wish. I always thought  $\frac{1}{3}$  of each would work well for this style, giving it a slightly enhanced biscuit and grainy character, although I have never had a chance to try it. You can also bump up the background malt character of the beer with 10% or so of Munich or Vienna malt, which adds a subtle bready fullness. Extract brewers can use a light-colored extract and blend in English, Munich or Pilsner extract, but it is acceptable and easier to use a light extract with specialty grains instead. All-grain brewers can use a single infusion mash and should target a mash that will leave enough long chain sugars in the beer to help fill out the body. A temperature around 150 to 154 °F (66 to 68 °C) creates wort with a nice balance between fermentable and non-fermentable sugars. Use a lower temperature when using lower attenuating yeasts or higher starting gravities. Use a higher temperature when using higher attenuating yeasts or making lower gravity beers. Anchor's mash schedule is a secret, although reportedly it starts at 140 °F (60 °C). Historical steam beer brewers supposedly used a mash temperature of 158 °F (70 °C). If you are trying to copy the Anchor example, I would start at 140 °F (60 °C) and then raise the mash for a rest at 158 °F (70 °C).

The only specialty malt you need for California common is crystal malt. You want to build a gentle but clearly evident caramel flavor and color. Use a mid-color crystal malt between 30 and 70 °L for up to 10% of the grist. If you want to develop more of a toasty/biscuity character, you can add a small percentage (< 5%) of toasted malts, such as Victory®, biscuit or even pale chocolate. Pale chocolate (200–250 °L) imparts a more intense

dark toasty note, which I like in this beer. If you use pale chocolate, keep it to a minor addition, around 1%. Stay away from malts darker than pale chocolate or use them in only the tiniest of amounts for color correction, not flavor. You do not want a roast character to come through in the beer. In general, keep the total of all special-

“ You want to build a gentle but clearly evident caramel flavor and color. ”

ty grain additions to less than 15%.

Making a beer similar to Anchor Steam requires Northern Brewer hops. If you want to experiment, avoid highly citrusy or fruity hops as they will overshadow the fermentation character, which is so important to this style. Finding other hop varieties that fit a judge's vision of California common can be tough. You will want to look for varieties that give a woody, earthy, or perhaps a spicy hop character. I have always thought Spalt would work well, with its interesting spicy and somewhat rustic character. You might also experiment with Cluster, Nugget, Perle, Santiam, Tettnanger or Liberty. Historically the hops would most likely have been California-grown Cluster hops.

Go bold on the flavor and aroma hop additions. It shouldn't be overwhelming and turn into an IPA, but the hop character, along with hop bitterness, should be full and readily apparent to the drinker. For flavor and aroma, add two or three later additions around  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  oz. per gallon (1 to 3 g/L). You can go lighter or heavier, just keep in mind the overall character you are trying to build. Target a bitterness-to-starting gravity ratio (IBU divided by OG) of 0.6 to 1.0.

While the original steam beer brewers did not have refrigeration, they did have a cool marine environment and took advantage of it by

using large, very shallow, open fermenters to hold down fermentation temperatures. They also selected a yeast that gave good results at warmer temperatures. So it is no surprise that the key to making a great California common is using the proper yeast at the proper temperature. This will give the beer just the right profile, with a subtle fruity note and a dry finish. Many people wonder if the California common and altbier yeasts available today are really lager or ale yeasts. Chris White at White Labs told me that their WLP810 (San Francisco Lager) strain is a true lager yeast and that their alt strains are true ale yeasts. Even though most brewers today choose to ferment California common with a lager yeast, that does not mean historically the beers were fermented with a true lager strain. Perhaps an alt or Kölsch yeast would work well, given the possibility that altbier brewing was the genesis for the style. Some recipes suggest using various lager yeasts, but those that I have tried in the past just do not seem to produce the right character as well as a bit too much sulfur. The best choice if you want to produce something like Anchor Steam is White Labs WLP810 (San Francisco Lager) or Wyeast 2112 (California Lager). Anchor ferments Anchor Steam in large, shallow, open fermenters housed in clean rooms supplied with sterile-filtered San Francisco air. The special fermenters allow the heat of fermentation to dissipate and hold the beer temperature lower than a tall cylindrical fermenter under the same conditions. The few times I have looked into the fermentation room, the ambient temperature was in the range of 64 to 67 °F (18 to 19 °C). You might experiment with open fermentation as well, but when using a homebrew-sized closed fermenter, I find a fermentation temperature of 62 to 64°F (17 to 18°C) gives the best result.

Follow that up with a month of cold conditioning and carbonation approaching three volumes and it will help you come a little closer to matching that wonderful Anchor classic. 

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