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DARK MILD



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BY GORDON STRONG

DARK MILD

Modern mild is derived from the weakest historical fresh ales, the X ales.

DARK MILD BY THE NUMBERS

OG:	1.030–1.038
FG:	1.008–1.013
SRM:	12–25
IBU:	10–25
ABV:	3.0–3.8%



Photo by depositphotos

While I'm not much of a pun guy, I do enjoy a good *double entendre* – such as “mad about mild.” I once went to a regional CAMRA (Campaign for Real Ale) festival in the UK where mild was the focus (the theme was billed as “mad about mild”). I learned a lot about the range of the style, information that ultimately made its way into the Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP) Style Guidelines. But the phrase also reminds me of my friend, noted beer historian Ron Pattinson, who always seems to have his knickers in a wad about the style and its misconceptions. Hopefully, I'll be able to praise one of my favorite styles without honking off a good mate.

I'll start by listing the things I like about a good dark mild – it's a lower-gravity beer that can pack a great deal of flavor, so it's both sessionable and interesting. It is a broad style so I think it allows for a wide interpretation by brewers, which makes each example worth a careful evaluation. And it has a long history that has changed considerably over time, so it can lead to some interesting discussions.

I had the honor of judging milds as part of the 2019 Great American Beer Festival (GABF), including the final medal round. A group of seven judges had to select the top three beers from a group of 12 finalists. As I was judging, I was thinking about the range of this style and its various interpretations. I also noticed several common problems with how brewers were designing and brewing the style.

After the GABF winners were announced, I learned that the gold medalist brewery, Brink Brewing Company, was about an hour away from where I lived. I visited the brewery in Cincinnati, Ohio while they were brewing a batch of their mild, Hold the Reins, and had a chat with their head brewer, Kelly Montgomery. I've included his advice later in this article.

The BJCP categorizes dark mild as

Style 13A in the Brown British Beer category along with British brown ale and English porter. The Brewers Association (BA) also recognizes a pale mild as part of their guidelines used in the GABF and World Beer Cup, but this is a very rare beer indeed. This article deals with the modern dark mild version that is more likely to be found in British pubs today.

Keep in mind that just because the three styles are grouped together doesn't mean that they are related in history – it's just that they are in a similar family of flavors and might be easier on the palate to judge together. People often try to read additional meaning into the grouping of individual styles into BJCP categories – this is frequently a mistake. The meaning of groupings is simply to facilitate judging, not necessarily explaining the styles themselves and their origin.

HISTORY

As with many styles of British origin, there is some confusion surrounding its history. The biggest mistake comes from assuming the word “mild” means the same thing now as it did when first used in the 1700s – it doesn't. The second mistake comes from taking a word, turning it into a style, and then assuming the style has been static over time – that never happens, by the way.

Modern mild, as a style, has only existed since the 20th century – in this case, the term mild is used as a noun. But a long time ago, mild was simply an adjective – it referred to a type of ale that was unaged (or fresh). Keep in mind at that time ale was also distinguished from beer, in that ale was more lightly hopped (rather than meaning top-fermented as it does today). So, a mild ale was a fresh, lightly-hopped, fermented grain beverage – note that neither alcoholic strength nor color are part of the definition.

Historically, ales were known by two dimensions – their original gravity (or implied strength) and their age. In the

DARK MILD

(5 gallons/19 L, all-grain)

OG = 1.043 FG = 1.014

IBU = 17 SRM = 22 ABV = 3.8%



INGREDIENTS

6 lbs. (2.7 kg) Maris Otter pale ale malt

1.25 lbs. (567 g) UK brown malt

8 oz. (227 g) UK crystal malt (50 °L)

4 oz. (113 g) pale chocolate malt

3 oz. (85 g) chocolate malt

8 oz. (227 g) flaked barley

8 oz. (227 g) flaked oats

4.2 AAU East Kent Golding hops (60 min.) (0.75 oz./21 g at 5.5% alpha acids)

Wyeast 1968 (London ESB Ale) or White Labs WLP002 (English Ale) or Imperial Yeast A09 (Pub) or Lallemand London ESB English-Style Ale yeast

$\frac{2}{3}$ cup corn sugar (for 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 is a single infusion mash: Mash in flaked grains, Maris Otter, and brown malts at 154 °F (68 °C) in 14 qts. (13.25 L) water. Hold at this temperature for 60 minutes. Add the remaining crushed crystal and chocolate malts and raise the mash temperature to 168 °F (76 °C). Recirculate the wort for 15 minutes before starting to sparge.

Sparge slowly in order to collect 6.5 gallons (24.5 L) of wort in the kettle. Bring the wort to a boil and boil for 90 minutes, adding hops at the time indicated in the recipe. Chill the wort to 68 °F (20 °C), aerate the wort, and pitch the yeast. Ferment at this temperature until complete, or you may want to raise the temperature a few degrees near the end of active fermentation.

Rack the beer, prime and bottle

(or cask) condition, or keg and force carbonate.

DARK MILD

(5 gallons/19 L, extract with grains)

OG = 1.043 FG = 1.014

IBU = 17 SRM = 22 ABV = 3.8%



INGREDIENTS

4.33 lbs. (2 kg) Maris Otter liquid malt extract

1 lb. 4 oz. (567 g) UK brown malt

8 oz. (227 g) UK crystal malt (50 °L)

4 oz. (113 g) pale chocolate malt

3 oz. (85 g) chocolate malt

8 oz. (227 g) Carapils® malt

4.2 AAU East Kent Golding hops (60 min.) (0.75 oz./21 g at 5.5% alpha acids)

Wyeast 1968 (London ESB Ale) or White Labs WLP002 (English Ale) or Imperial Yeast A09 (Pub) or Lallemand London ESB English-Style Ale yeast

$\frac{2}{3}$ cup corn sugar (for priming)

STEP BY STEP

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

Steep the grains for 30 minutes. Remove and rinse. Turn off the heat. Add the malt extract and stir thoroughly to dissolve completely. You do not want to feel liquid extract at the bottom of the kettle when stirring with your spoon. Turn the heat back on and bring to a boil.

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

Chill the wort to 68 °F (20 °C), pitch the yeast, and ferment until complete.

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

TIPS FOR SUCCESS:

Mild ales of today are built on a malt foundation. With that in mind, Head Brewer Kelly Montgomery from Brink

Brewing Co., who helped design this recipe, suggests English maltsters like Crisp, Thomas Fawcett, and Simpsons for this grain bill. Local craft malts may also be a good fit.

early 1800s, mild (fresh) ales and beers were often marked with Xs – the more Xs, the higher strength (XXXX was a very strong ale). Keeping (stale) ales and beers were often marked with Ks. Again, the more Ks, the higher the strength. Modern mild is derived from the weakest historical fresh ales, the X ales.

In the 1700s and early 1800s, beers and ales were made from pale malt, amber malt, and brown malt. Beers called mild weren't dark then. Black (patent) malt wasn't invented until 1817, and crystal malts weren't really used much until the 1900s. The Free Mash Tun Act of 1880 allowed brewers to use sugars and other adjuncts (corn, oats, rice, etc.) in addition to malt. Multiple world wars, taxes, and changing tastes continually lowered the alcohol levels of beers. What were 1.070 beers in the mid-1800s dropped to 1.030 and below after World War I. So, you can imagine, the formulations of beers also changed over time.

Sugars used in brewing weren't just plain white sugar, either. There were (and are) several grades of sugar of varying colors (darkness) that also impart considerable flavors. Like the candi syrups used in Belgium, sugar has been an important part of British brewing for over 100 years. Crystal malts can also impart some of those flavors, as well, and different grades of roasted malts (black malt, chocolate malt, and others) can be used to add flavor and color.

After World War II, modern forms of mild were pretty much as they are today, except that it was easier to find paler (light amber-ish) milds. Bitters became more popular in many locations, such as London, where milds were thought of as an old person's drink or one for the working classes such as miners. Mild disappeared in many parts of the UK throughout the 1960s and 1970s, although it can still be found in the industrial Midlands and Wales.

SENSORY PROFILE

Modern dark milds are a dark, lower-gravity, malt-forward English ale, often best presented from cask. The dark part of the style doesn't really mean deep brown or black, like porter or stout – it can be coppery to mahogany (reddish) brown. Often it is pale enough to tell

that it isn't opaque; clarity is generally good. The beer can have a low head if served from cask.

The dark color can come from a variety of sources (dark malts, dark sugars, or a mix), so the resulting flavor of the beer can cover a wide range. Caramel, toffee, nutty, chocolate, or very lightly roasted aromas and flavors are possible, as are fruity notes from sugars, malts, or yeast. Base malt flavors with bready, biscuity, or lightly toasted character supports the other flavors. Overall, the balance is malty but not intensely so as this is a lower-gravity beer. Hop aroma and flavor is often absent, or at a very low level.

Hop bitterness is restrained, enough so that the beer has some balance but not enough that the finish and after-taste is bitter. The beer can finish sweet to dry; a wide range is possible. The body is light to medium, and no alcohol should be sensed. Carbonation is normally on the lower side, particularly if the beer is served on cask. The combination of body and carbonation should not leave the beer flat or watery, however. As a session-type beer, the alcohol range for most examples is in the 3–3.5% range, although stronger examples exist.

The character malt (or sugars) and fruitiness normally provides the most flavor interest in the beer. Some darker versions can have a slightly roasty flavor, sometimes of light chocolate character, but a licorice or treacle-like flavor is also possible. The fruitiness from fermentation can give some light apple-like flavors, and darker crystal malts or sugars can give plum, raisin, prune, fig, or other dark/dried fruit flavors. A pleasant combination of flavors is desirable, not necessarily a one-note beer or a train-wreck of every flavor.

When judging milds at the GABF, I found several common problems. I use a version of rapid sensory profiling called napping (less fun than it sounds) to quickly group beers I'm evaluating. I was quickly able to sort out the ones I preferred and those that had stylistic problems (at the final round, none typically have brewing problems). I grouped those with common issues and then had time to think about them while others finished their evaluations.

Some milds seemed too weak or

watery. Yes, these are low-alcohol beers, but they shouldn't be low-flavor. Some of the watery ones probably had too few dextrins so they just seemed thin on the palate. Others were just caramelly and sweet, so came across as too one-dimensional for my taste. More bitterness probably could have balanced the sweetness, but additional flavor interest was needed to hold my attention. On the other hand, we thought one was too complex, and was almost porter-like in flavor. Keeping the beer from tasting too much like a porter or brown ale is important.

A small group of beers was too roasted, almost stout-like in flavor. Those often had too dark of a color, which was a leading indicator. A few were too big or alcoholic, or had too much of a hop character. Some judges can be deceived by stronger flavors, but good judges will keep in mind the overall balance of the style.

I had separated my 12 beers into three groups: The first one was those I was willing to fight for, the second was those I thought possibly deserving of a medal, and the final group were ones I was willing to let go. I had one beer in the first group, three beers in the second, and eight in the third. Everyone else at the table had my favorite beer in their top three, and more than half agreed that it was also their favorite. A quick round indeed, but it was made easy by having such a good example.

BREWING INGREDIENTS AND METHODS

As this is one of the most traditional of British beers, traditional British ingredients and methods should be used. British malts, hops, and yeast will produce good results, and brewing sugars and adjuncts should not be frowned upon. Not all British ingredients are readily available to American homebrewers, so some substitution can give similar results as long as proper care is given to their use.

British pale ale base malt is common, although the more dextrinous and highly kilned, mild malt is a favorite of mine. Blending base malts can give good flavor results as well. Using a British Maris Otter malt will give a bready base, although I'll happily use

Golden Promise as well. If mild malt isn't available, I'll often mix a pale ale malt with a Vienna malt to approximate the profile. Flaked maize or torried wheat can be used as starchy adjuncts (maybe up to 10% of the grist). I tend to avoid amber and brown malts as they can often provide too much of a drying, heavily toasted flavor; this is a personal preference, however.

I see crystal malts and brewing sugars to be somewhat equivalent in that they are used to provide flavor and color. Darker malts are unusual, although a light dash of chocolate malt or black malt can be used. Traditional English recipes often make use of darker invert brewing sugars and caramel coloring, but these are hard to find for American homebrewers. Belgian candi syrups can be used as a non-traditional substitute. Or finding crystal malts with flavors you like, possibly including layering different flavors with varying color crystal malts. Think of dark malts more for color adjustment than flavor, so I might tend towards the (non-traditional) debittered dark malts.

The amount of crystal malt can vary widely, from perhaps 5% of the grist to 25%. One outstanding historical example, Sarah Hughes Dark Ruby Mild, has a grist of 75% pale ale malt and 25% crystal malt. Finding the specific grains that give the flavor profile you want is the hardest part of recipe formulation for this style. Not all crystal malts of the same Lovibond value taste the same — country of origin and specific maltster matter. It pays to experiment and run tests with different brands.

Hopping should be at a low enough level that there isn't a major flavor impact, so virtually any varieties can be used. I would avoid citrusy or too trendy a hop, and go with traditional English varieties. Fuggles and Goldings are usually my choice, as they can provide earthy and floral flavors. I would use a bittering addition, and possibly a small flavor/aroma addition. The bitterness level depends somewhat on the flavor profile and the residual sweetness (final gravity) of the beer. More flavor and sweetness can support more bitterness; the perceived bitterness and balance is most important, and that's hard to express as a single number.

Yeast, likewise, should be English in character. Fruity or malty strains would be more preferable than minerally or dry ones. Clean or lightly fruity American strains can be used, but the character malts would have to supply some additional fruity notes. Average to slightly warm fermentation temperatures can be used, but not so high as to start producing off-flavors. I often use the Fuller's (Wyeast 1968 or WLP002) or Young's (Wyeast 1318) strains but many choices are possible.

Milds typically don't have much of a water-influenced character, although I would avoid water with high sulfates. If adding calcium salts, I would prefer calcium chloride to give the beer a rounder, sweeter, wetter malty balance and finish. A single infusion mash is traditionally British, and the conversion temperature can vary. I tend to prefer to mash around 151 °F (66 °C) to give the beer some dryness, but I also tend to use dextrinous base grains and crystal malts, which will give the beer some residual sweetness anyway.

I wrote these notes on the style before interviewing Brink Brewing Company about their beer. Happily, I found nothing to contradict these notes, except that they use a small amount of brown malt in their beer, they use flaked barley and oats to add some body and mouthfeel, and they use a small amount of chocolate and pale chocolate malts for flavor complexity. Maybe I'll reconsider my suggestion about limiting brown malt . . .

When I asked them for their thoughts about the style, Kelly Montgomery said that he found milds were often thin and watery, and sometimes were harsh and astringent. So, he set out to design a recipe that avoided these issues while using English ingredients to drive more bready and nutty flavors in the finished beer. He wanted the beer to have some mouthfeel so that customers wouldn't lose interest in the beer after a few sips. He also wanted to have some richer chocolate flavors as part of the flavor profile.

HOMEBREW EXAMPLE

This is based on the three-time GABF medal-winning Hold the Reins dark mild from Brink Brewing Company in

Cincinnati, Ohio. Brink was named Very Small Brewing Company of the Year at the 2019 GABF, their second time winning this award. Head brewer Kelly Montgomery provided the recipe, which I converted to homebrew scale. He mentioned that the recipe came from his homebrewer days, and has evolved over the years as he's tuned the profile to match his vision of the style.

Brink uses a complex grist, but each ingredient is layering flavor and adding a desired effect. The use of flaked barley and oats provides some additional mouthfeel and body, which keeps the beer from seeming too thin. English malts provide rich flavors — Montgomery prefers English maltsters Crisp, Thomas Fawcett, and Simpsons for his grains (those are among my favorites as well).

This mild is at the top end of the range for alcohol for the style, but doesn't seem overly big. The bitterness level balances the malt nicely, adding a counterpoint to the malt sweetness without overshadowing that aspect. The final gravity sometimes finishes a touch higher, which can also add to the mouthfeel. Hops are East Kent Golding and in only one bittering addition. Simple but classic.

Water treatments are minimal; Montgomery uses calcium chloride, which enhances the maltiness of the beer. His supply water is carbon-filtered and treated with lactic acid to reduce the pH. He adds the darker malts after the mash (one of the methods I have talked about frequently), which he feels helps reduce harshness.

He uses the Fuller's yeast strain, fermented on the warmer side. He says that under-pitching slightly helps ester formation, which is welcome in this style (similar to the methods used in making hefeweizen).

I don't think there are any real surprises here. This seems to me like an American homebrewer's take on the style; you won't find classic English recipes using these ingredients. But the results speak for themselves. Using good ingredients, thoughtfully chosen for a reason, can produce superior results. If you have the ability to cask-condition your beers, this is a great beer to serve on a beer engine. 