

Winter is a perfectly good time for beer

By Rosie Schaap, New York Times

Maybe you also went through that phase. The one when you kept an eye on an ominous bucket in a dark corner of your kitchen until the time came to invite over friends, tap it and drink it. Maybe your friends also gulped it, smiled stiffly and said something like, "It's . . . interesting." And maybe they also grimaced as if they had just sucked down a rotten egg. I didn't blame them. The brown ale I concocted during my brief foray into home brewing was dreadful stuff – syrupy, unbalanced and weird.

I could accept that I had no inherent gifts in the beer-making department, but my failure put me off beer – at least the kind with flavor – for a long while. Sure, there's nothing like a cold beer on a hot summer day, but I don't want too much trouble. I want something light and pale and watery (and inexpensive) straight from a bottle: Corona or High Life or Rolling Rock suit me just fine. The same goes for when I eat Chinese or Mexican food, sausages and cabbage or anything Eastern European.

Brown Corduroy

For two cocktails:

1 oz. Bulleit Bourbon

2 dashes orange bitters

Krusovice Cerne beer to top

Grated nutmeg

Shake bourbon and bitters over ice. Strain into a highball over fresh ice. Top up with beer. Grate a little nutmeg on top.



But the bar where I work carries a great variety of beers, and so I've had to reacquaint myself in order to answer my customers' questions. And what I've discovered is that after a long absence, beer and I get along more than fine. My favorites –

often from Central and Eastern Europe, where, for centuries, they've known a thing or two about the craft of beer – are characterized by depth but not burdened by difficulty. There's a warm, slightly sweet, nutty, toasty character that many of them share – flavors that make them naturals for drinking in the winter, even for drinkers who normally think of summer when we think beer.

It takes a lot to force me to forgo whiskey around this time of year, but some very special specimens, like Innis & Gunn's Oak-Aged Rum Cask Beer (strong stuff but reminiscent of cream soda), Allagash Black (a yeasty, Maine-made alternative to my usual Guinness) and those shown here, can make me do just that. Even an excellent, not-too-aggressive I.P.A., while not dark, has enough going on to win me over. These bottles aren't for chugging; they're for sipping, and the first one is satisfying enough to savor after dinner, with fruit and chocolate and good, sharp cheese. Beer has a place in mixed drinks, too, which – kicked up with spirits and laced with spice – can make for surprising and warming cocktails, like a Brown Corduroy.

In July, sure, pass me a Corona. But a deep, dark beer on a cold winter's day? That's pretty refreshing, too.