



Someone once said, "If beer and women aren't the answer, then you're asking the wrong questions."

Stone Brewery is proving, yet again, that they are in the forefront of the craft beer industry. The third installment of their 'Women Only' beer classes - held at the brewery – featured eight stouts and porters and about 40 beer loving women of all ages.

This stout and porter tasting seemed to transcend all things mediocre, ditch the more traditional or usual choices, and offered up an 11% American Imperial Stout, a 10% Scottish stout aged in whisky casks, an oatmeal stout brewed with real chocolate and an American Porter that was dry hopped, to name several. Stone is known not to fuck around. And there were no men to be seen...unless you walked down the stairs to the bar, of course. But for a couple hours, the upper level at the Stone Bistro was occupied only by women and dark beer. Women and dark beer....sounds like a western movie.

Our beer mentor of the evening was a petite, sprightly and knowledgeable Stone employee. There's no denying that Kathryn is passionate about beer – especially the darker side of the beer family. "Light beer is the worst thing you could ever do to yourself. If you want to lose weight – exercise," she said before her timely laugh (more accurately, a modest, blended chuckle-giggle).

As I munched on the bread and cheese that were on the table, Kathryn began talking about the misconceptions of dark beer.

Stout, it sounds so serious. Just look at Guinness' long and successful advertising campaign espousing "Guinness for Strength." Stout is an archaic term meaning "strong", though it's not usually the case. Sure, they're full-bodied, yet usually delicate. We know it's dark, sometimes resembling watered down ink. But Stout beers offer a soft, almost chewy richness, unlike any lager.

The first noncommercial taster of the evening was Avery New World Porter, an American Porter coming in at 6.7% ABV. Its blend of roasted malts, dark chocolate, dark fruits, and alcohol yielded chicory and some vanilla on the nose. New World Porter is not your typical dark beer, as it's dry hopped. Citric hops are evident and impart a slightly bitter bite, while splinters of woodiness, chocolate and coffee provide for an even balance. Some of the ladies loved it, some, well, not so much.

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Moving on, we quickly began to taste another American Porter. The Alaskan Smoked Porter, weighing in at 6.5% had some extra flavor from special smoked malts. I suddenly felt like I was camping, with the strong bacon smell, maybe even smoked salmon. This one had nice earthy character. About half of the women liked it.

Our servers then came back around to our tables and poured the next two – Victory Baltic Thunder and Moylan's Dragoon's Dry Irish Stout. All the while, Kathryn spoke of stout and porter history and the healing benefits thereof. I could go into the advantages of drinking stouts and porters over their lighter counterparts, but that should be it's own article.

The Baltic Porter has a big name for a big beer. Weighing in at 8.5%, Baltic Thunder is made with lager yeast and has a little bite, but little to no aftertaste.

It was at this point I noticed a nice shift in the rooms' demeanor. The ladies were getting a nice little buzz and were chatting more and more with their beer cohorts about the ebony beauties. I heard, "tastes like soda!" and "it's really smooth and sweet!"

Our next taster was Anderson Valley Barley Flats Oatmeal Stout from Boonville, California. It adds oatmeal for a silky smoothness and a touch of sweetness. As Kathryn noted, "it's a sweet little appetizer beer." Its taste is simpler and more candid than the European Stouts, sans the high alcohol levels. Velvety-smooth coffee-like roasted barley and roasted malt mocha aromas are prominent. A good number of women preferred this taster.

The same brewery that produced a 32% ABV beer called Tactical Nuclear Penguin, produced the sixth taster. Sometimes dubbed, the "Stone of Scotland", this brewery is known for their creative branding strategy and strong beers. BrewDog Paradox Isle of Arran is a big American Double/Imperial Stout coming in at 10%. It's aged in Islay malt whisky casks – too cool. This was in my top three.

The pour showed a thin meniscus of soapy eggshell white head. Aromas of rum and burnt currants, raisins arose first, even before caramel and French roast coffee. Flavors very closely mimic the aromas. The foretaste is surprisingly light, smooth and smoky coupled with light coffee bitterness and malts. The intensity definitely favors the roasted grains with the coffee, cocoa, nuts, and slight whiskey notes. It's a handsome beer.

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With a proud and content grin, Kathryn then talked about the inspiration and name behind the Imperial stout. First made for Catherine the Great, it was given a much higher alcohol content to make shipping the product to Russia simpler.

I think Kathryn and the Stone crew did a great job in picking the best for last. The remaining dark pours were Deschutes The Abyss and Stone 12th Anniversary Bitter Chocolate Oatmeal Stout. Just delectable. An American Imperial Stout, the Abyss is aged in bourbon whiskey barrels and brewed with licorice and molasses. It poured an obsidian black. At Kathryn's astute suggestion, the room full of ladies waited as long as we possibly could for the temperature to warm up a bit, before tasting the world class beer. This 11% beer had barrel character, but it was never overpowering. Light nuances of oak and vanilla and a kiss of bourbon gave it great complexity. This one quickly became my favorite of the night, as all four of us the table gave our most genial smile to the server to give us a second helping of this rich, mysterious, limited available brew. It's definitely on par with a fine dark rum or bourbon as a mature sipper. The soft cheese was a great accompaniment.

Last, but definitely not least was the Stone 12th Anniversary Bitter Chocolate Oatmeal Stout, coming in at 9.2%. This almost two-year old beer was brewed with real, unsweetened chocolate. That's right – REAL chocolate! This was officially my second favorite of the evening. I mean, women, chocolate, beer – she must have cleverly planned this one. Nice one, Kathryn. For those that are interested in aging beers, try it with this one or try it with ice cream! Seriously, we're talking pure hedonistic indulgence.

True to its history of innovation and dedication to great craft beer, Stone is setting a precedence in bringing fine craft beers to an audience typically neglected by the beer industry. Let's raise a glass to the rest of the craft industry following suit!

Look for the next women's only event on March 1st – a class focusing on hops. Guys, don't worry, there are other classes for you too. Just check out <http://www.stonebrew.com/calendar/>

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