

Russian Imperial Stout Vintage Beer Tasting

By Paul Sullivan

Bring up the subject of aged beer to most beer drinkers and you'll most likely be met with a blank stare, or a distasteful look. The concept of aged beer is foreign to many beer enthusiasts, as opposed to the wine world, where aging bottles 10 or 20 years or longer is quite common for some styles.

Oenophiles generally agree that how long to age wine basically comes down to the style of wine. In general, white wines benefit less from aging than reds, especially the heartier, more complex reds like Bordeaux and Cabernet Sauvignon. Besides the style of wine, many other factors come into play, from the size of the bottle, how heavily the wine was filtered, and, of course, storage conditions such as temperature ranges, humidity levels, atmospheric pressure, and so on.

Beer, on the other hand, is thought of as a beverage best consumed young, indeed, the fresher the better is the rule most go by. As with wine though, certain high gravity styles like Barleywines and the focus of this most recent tasting, Russian Imperial Stouts do benefit from aging. The question, though, is how long to age? Even with these strong beers, common practice is to age no more than 5 to 10 years, or longer if the beer is forgotten in a corner of a basement. In general, stronger, darker beers hold up best.

The history of Russian Imperial Stout is similar to India Pale Ale in that it began with a need for a very strong, highly-hopped beer that would survive a long sea voyage, in this case, to the Baltic States, for the enjoyment of the Russian nobility. First brewed in the late 1800's by Thrale's Anchor Brewery in London, the brewery was subsequently purchased after the death of Henry Thrale, by two bankers named Barclay (of Barclay's bank of London), and Perkins. Although other breweries were exporting to Russia, Barclay Perkins was one of the most successful. In 1955 the brewery was again sold, this time to a brewer named Courage, who closed the Anchor brewery but transferred the name to his own brewery. The beer was reportedly aged in wooden casks for a year, and bottled once a year. Courage Russian Imperial Stout was last brewed in 1993, then discontinued by new owners, the Courage Group. This 1993 vintage was the youngest beer.

Spuyten Duyvil, Brooklyn's awesome eclectic beer bar, was the perfect setting for tasting this amazing lineup of Russian Imperial Stouts that Bill Coleman and Warren Becker amassed. The lineup included Courage Imperial Stouts from 1993, the first one sampled by the group, back to 1957, followed by two Old Ales also from Courage, a 1953 Alton Ale, and a 1937 Founders Ale, and topped off by an **extremely** rare corked Champagne bottle of 1935 Courage Barclay Russian Imperial Stout. It was an intimidating lineup of strong beers to say the least. As Heavyweight brewer Tom Baker commented, "How

often do you get to ingest something made in 1937—malt, hops, yeast from that long ago”

Followed by a of youngest beer was from 1993, the last year that and the oldest was from somewhere between 1932 and 1935, a mind-bending **72 years old**. The pleasant surprise is that nearly all of these beers were in good shape, some exceptional. Although it was impossible to know the variables that each had been exposed to as far as temperatures, etc they all held up remarkably well. This tasting made believers out of anyone who had doubts as to the viability of beers of this age. This writer walked out of the tasting with a different attitude towards the whole ting. I used to routinely dump out old beer, automatically assuming that it wasn't even worth tasting. Now I was wondering what those beers would have tasted like.

Courage Imperial Stout 1993

Courage Imperial Stout 1984

Courage Imperial Stout 1983

Courage Imperial Stout 1977

Courage Imperial Stout 1976

Courage Imperial Stout 1975

Courage Imperial Stout 1974

Courage Imperial Stout 1973

Courage Imperial Stout 1971

Courage Imperial Stout 1970

Courage Imperial Stout 1969

Courage Imperial Stout 1957

The two bottles of Old Ale:

Courage Alton Ale 1953

Courage Founders Ale 1937

*The Piece de Resistance, 750 ml corked bottle of
Courage Barclay Russian Imperial Stout 1935*