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All about stout, just in time for St. Paddy's

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There's a science, or at least a skill, to pouring the perfect pint of Guinness Stout. The Irish are finicky about the way bartenders draw draughts of Ireland's favorite libation, so here are some tips.

Before you pour: Ideally, use an imperial pint (20 ounces) glass to accommodate the frothy head. It should be clean, dry and at room temperature. Excessive chilling of the glass affects the beer's presentation.

If you're tapping a Guinness keg, the lines should be cleaned a minimum of once a week. The system should let you dispense the beer, chilled to between 38 and 46 degrees, with a gas mixture of 75 percent nitrogen and 25 percent carbon dioxide at a pressure of 30 pounds per square inch. That's needed to attain a creamy head.

The perfect pint: Holding the glass at a 45-degree angle under the tap, pull the spigot until the pint is about three-quarters full.

Allowing the beer to settle before filling it the rest of the way helps the head develop. Then fill the glass slowly until the head crests the rim of the pint.

Does the foam peak like a meringue? Are the bubbles going down rather than up inside of the glass (a function of the nitrogen in the mix)? If so, you've poured yourself a perfect pint.

Guinness isn't the only Irish stout available, but it's long been

considered the country's national drink. Beer writer Michael Jackson maintains that there may be as many as six styles of Guinness available, depending on where you go in the world, ranging from 3.5 percent to 7 percent alcohol by volume. Domestically available varieties hover around 4.2 percent, which makes it a lighter beer despite its darkly roasted appearance.

According to the brewery, Guinness is about 11 calories an ounce, which would add up to 132 calories for a 12-ounce serving. By comparison, Miller Lite is 96 calories, and Miller High Life is 143 calories.

Guinness is served in 156 countries worldwide and contains nothing more than roasted, malted barley, yeast, hops and water, except in Nigeria, where the barley is replaced by sorghum.

More than 10 million pints of Guinness are served daily worldwide, which totals more than 1.8 billion in a year's time. No wonder Irish eyes are often smiling.

All kinds of stouts: Guinness is an example of the traditional dry or Irish stout, characterized by a toast or coffee-like flavor. There's also milk stout, brewed with lactose to produce a sweeter beer, and oatmeal stout, made with up to 5 percent oats. Both stouts were thought to have healthful and restorative purposes, with milk stout a favorite among nursing mothers in the 19th century.

There also are coffee stouts, brewed with black patent malt to give it a coffee-like flavor, and chocolate stout, brewed with chocolate malt. Occasionally these stouts will have some of their namesake ingredients added for character, although they're not required for authenticity.

There are even oyster stouts, an homage to the days when oysters and stout, a particular favorite of English statesman Benjamin Disraeli, were considered a good pub lunch. Some stouts still may be brewed with a handful of oysters tossed in the barrel, but most exist in name only.

The most powerful version, a Russian or imperial stout, was first brewed in 19th century England for the czars of Russia and generally boasts a higher alcohol content, usually between 8 and 10 percent, designed to combat the cold Russian winters. Imperial stout is in a

class by itself, heartier in every way, compared to its Irish brethren.

Irish flavor, local favorites: The Irish appear genetically predisposed to favoring Dublin-based Guinness, which has a dry palate and offers a sense of fullness even though it's fairly light both in alcohol content and body.

Two other Irish stouts in widespread distribution include Beamish Stout, brewed in Cork and owned by Scottish & Newcastle, which also distributes Foster's Lager and Newcastle Brown Ale. Beamish is similar to Guinness, although not quite as dry or as finely finished on the palate.

The city of Cork also is home to Murphy's Stout, owned by Heineken since 2001. Murphy's isn't as dry as Guinness and has a slightly sweeter, almost nutty flavor. It can cloy a bit, but proves a nice alternative for the rare drinker who tires of Guinness.

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