

Top 10 Best Local Breweries in Arizona

Written by David Bowers

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Whether it is spending time at the lake, pool, backyard barbeque or just relaxing on your couch in the cool confines of your home; one thing that truly says “vacation” is cracking open of an ice cold beer. And thanks to the 10 best breweries in Arizona, this summer season is pouring out a whole lot of love for beer admirers.



Four Peaks Brewing Company, Tempe

What makes Four Peaks Brewery the best brewery in Arizona? It isn't just the beer; it's the atmosphere, the food, the people, the history, the feeling of community that is conveyed to every guest that visits the old Pacific Creamery originally constructed in 1892.

Their eight standard beers are the most rewarded beers in the state and have garnered international acclaim. Most recently, The World Beer Cup awarded Gold Medals to their Sunbru Kölsch Style and Hop Knot India Pale Ale and a Bronze Medal to their 8th Street English Style Ale. While I have enjoyed many a pitcher of their banana and clove flavored HefeWeizen on their patio on a hot summer day and downed numerous pints of the Raj IPA, it is their Scottish Style Ale – Kilt Lifter that has made Four Peaks famous. A strong Scottish Ale that boasts a 6% ABV, amber color, malty sweetness and just a touch of smokiness with a caramel & toffee aroma, this beer is sure to make you hear the legendary sounds of bagpipes playing “Danny Boy” in the background. If there is a singular point to this article, it is “Run, don't walk, to Four Peaks Brewery.” www.fourpeaks.com

SanTan Brewing Company, Chandler

Another newcomer to the Arizona craft brew scene that is consistently vying for the top spot for best brewery in Arizona opened up in downtown Chandler in 2007 and hasn't looked back since. With its dedication to only distributing their beer in cans, SanTan Brewery has established itself as the front runner of the recent canned beer renaissance. Once believed by beer snobs that canning beer was less attractive, SanTan brewers realized that despite its appearance, canning beer was the best way to keep the beer away from harmful lights and temperature to maintain its superior quality and freshness. They are the National sponsor of the Ameri “Can” Beer Festival recently held in Scottsdale that welcomed over 150 local and National canned beers. MensHealth magazine recently named SanTan the best beer in football cities in *32 teams, 32 beers*.

Their list of standard and seasonal beers is incredible and I have yet to have a beer there that I didn't love. My favorite is the Devil's Ale which is a West Coast Pale Ale that takes its name from the maroon and gold color of the beer and the nearby ASU Sun Devils. It is not only my favorite, but recently received a Gold Medal at the 2011 Great Arizona Beer Festival. Their seasonal beers are a lot of fun and are quite creative with names like Count Hopula Blood Red I.P.A., Sex Panther Double Chocolate Porter and Mr. Pineapple Wheat Fruit Ale. www.santanbrewing.com

Lumberyard Brewing Company, Flagstaff

The owners of Flagstaff's iconic Beaver Street Brewery & Whistle Stop Café have truly outdone themselves when they restored one of the town's last standing buildings from the lumber era in 2000 and created the Lumberyard

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Brewing Company. Two of their beers have been consistently awarded best in class including their Red and IPA. The American Craft Beer Festival has awarded the IPA from Lumberyard Brewing the gold medal two years in a row, which is an amazing feat as it is by far the most popular category with nearly double the entrants of other categories. This American IPA has an ABV of 6.1% and hits 90 on the IBU scale. This copper colored ale is heavier bodied with a high bitterness that is sure to please any and all "hop heads." The citrus & floral notes with a subtle malt ending make this beer one of the best IPA's that I have experienced. www.lumberyardbrewingcompany.com



Nimbus Brewery, Tucson

What began as a small, local brewery in the spring of 1996 has grown into the largest brewery based in Arizona with three 150-barrel fermenters that stand nearly 30 feet tall and holding nearly 5,000 gallons of beer each. The brewery opened up two locations statewide with bistros serving their craft beer and an extensive menu including burgers, brewpub food & wood-fired pizzas. Nimbus beer is renowned throughout the state for its collection of natural beers that derive from the local Tucson groundwater that resembles that of the water found on the Burton in the heart of England. It is that exceptional water that makes their flagship beer, Old Monkey Shine a favorite of true beer enthusiasts. This traditional English Strong Ale is a medium-bodied ale with a dark, roasted flavor derived from seven different malts and brown sugar. This dark beer starts with a touch of sweetness but finishes dry and crisp. Although this beer has an explosive flavor profile that could almost be considered a dessert beer, it packs quite a punch with an ABV content of 8.2%! I assume the name is derived by the deceptiveness of the beer and its effects on the casual beer drinker. www.nimbusbeer.com

Papago Brewing, Scottsdale

This popular beer bar has been a mainstay of both the Tempe and Scottsdale crowds due to its proximity in south Scottsdale. The extensive tasting room not only serves its amazing beers but also houses 30 taps as well as nearly 500 different bottled beers from the region, country & the world. Opened in 2001, this brewery has made quite a splash on the craft brew world and is home to one of the few fruit beers that I absolutely cannot do without! The Orange Blossom Wheat Beer is definitely in my TOP 10 favorite beers of ALL TIME. This light American wheat ale has flavors of mandarin oranges and vanilla and once it hits your palate, you'll be sure to harken back to your youth standing outside the ice cream truck with your bike on the ground savoring your first creamsicle. This experience is exponentially magnified because it is a beer – mmmmm ice cream beer. papagobrewing.com

Oak Creek Brewing Company, Sedona

I love Sedona and I love craft brew so when I found this place while looking for the Red Rock Tours office with my family many years ago, I fell in love and it has been a mainstay and "must visit" for anybody and everybody that visits Sedona and/or Oak Creek Canyon. Their brews have consistently won gold medals from both the North American Brewers' Association and at the Great American Beer Festival. Their flagship beer and my personal favorite Nut Brown Ale sets the standard for what all nut brown ales should aspire to. The heartiness of the nut flavor comingled with a hint of spice that finishes with a gentle touch of bitter hops that makes this beer a true pioneer in its field that should be savored time and time again. www.oakcreekbrew.com



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Gentle Ben's Brewing Company, Tucson

Located basically on the University of Arizona campus, Gentle Ben's Brewing Company has been brewing award winning beers since 1991 from their original location on University and also at Barrio Brewing Company just west of the downtown area located across from the railroad tracks.

I have had the opportunity to try all of their beers but I believe their original to be the best. The Red Cat Amber is super smooth and highly enjoyable; not too hoppy, not too thick – a perfectly balanced beer that hits on all areas but allows all beer style lovers to bask in its refreshing flavor. gentlebens.com

Sleepy Dog Brewery, Tempe

Another relative newcomer to the Craft Brew scene, Tempe's Sleepy Dog Brewery opened up in 2007 right down the street from Arizona State University and immediately had a cult following due to its relative location to another vastly popular brewery – more on them later. Being a parent of two Golden Retrievers myself, I love the dog theme and feel right at home when I am there. Sleepy Dog is a production brewery with an intimate tasting room that boasts sports, music and they even allow you to bring in your own food from elsewhere because they focus on the beer. Thank goodness for that because their beer is phenomenal! Having tasted four of their hand-crafted brews, I am going to have to say that their Wet Snout Milk Stout was my favorite; a dark, rich & creamy stout that fills you up right. www.sleepydogbrewing.com

Sonoran Brewing Company, Scottsdale

Located at the Pinnacle Peak Patio Steakhouse in North Scottsdale, this craft brewery has been churning out some of the state's best beer since 1996 – the old days in craft brew speak. Their flagships beers the Burning Bird Pale Ale & Desert Amber have long been a staple in my diet of not only great Arizona beers, but great beers period. I recently tried their White Chocolate Ale and although I am usually not a fan of fruit or sweet beers, this was so subtle and left a pleasant after taste that begged me to order another pint. <http://www.sonoranbrewing.com>

Dragoon Brewing Company, Tucson

This newcomer has been brewing and gearing up for their grand opening for the past 15 months and I had the opportunity to visit their facility for a tasting and I must say that I was blown away. With only 2 beers available for tasting, their India Pale Ale (IPA) was a beauty to behold & savor with an ABV (alcohol content) of 7.5% and 83 IBU (hop content) this beer quickly found its place in my heart. <http://www.dragoonbrewing.com>