

Octoberfest

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Downtown Denver offers plenty of opportunities to enjoy beer's finer flavors.

Colorado is widely termed "the Napa Valley of beer," both because of its proliferation of breweries (20 microbreweries and two major breweries, to be exact) and the mythically pure Rocky Mountain water that is rumored to lure them there. So it's no surprise to find that the Mile High City has been hosting the country's largest ticketed beer festival—what's come to be known as the "super bowl" of such assemblages, the annual Great American Beer Festival—every October since 1984. Not only is the event a superior excuse to take the relatively short jaunt to Denver at a seasonable time, or to get tipsy tasting the country's finest brews, it's also informative.

At the 2007 festival, approximately 2,832 beers in 72 categories were judged by more than 100 judges. Four hundred and seventy-four breweries participated. And the festival served more than 18,000 gallons of beer (1,800 beers in one-ounce pours) to about 46,000 visitors. The annual festival allows aficionado attendees to sample by state (see how our Arizona brewers stack up), region or style of beer (try Pilseners to porters to pumpkin and chocolate varieties) and taste the medal winners. In addition, seminars by chefs and brewers on cooking with beer and pairing beer with food will be conducted. You'll refine your palate and learn what you prefer in a beer. Plus, the event draws 40,000 beer aficionados, so you're bound to meet fellow enthusiasts and bond over the beverage.

But the beer in Denver doesn't stop flowing at the festival doors. Without even getting in a car (and we recommend you don't!), you can experience a great deal of the brewing greatness that Lower Downtown Denver (LoDo to locals) has to offer. In Downtown Denver alone, you can visit 15 breweries and micropubs all within a comfortable walking distance (presuming daylight and comfortable shoes, of course).

Denver's beer roots run deep—our preferred LoDo brewing destination was founded and is still owned by the mayor of Denver, John Hickenlooper. Wynkoop, Colorado's first brewpub and now the largest in the country in terms of the quantity of beer it produces, is a local treasure for its distinctive brews, its authentic yet upscale vibe, its excellent beer flights, and the true bonuses—a nicely equipped billiards hall upstairs and an improv comedy club below. We tried most of the establishment's beers on tap and highly recommend the B3K Schwartz, a perfectly dark brew with chocolate afternotes. For the wild of heart and strong of stomach, we suggest Patty's chile beer. The aroma alone makes a statement, entreating the palate to experience the rich flavors of this brew. The SOB was exactly as it sounds—a bitter statement beer best enjoyed in small dose—unless of course you like that sort of thing.

Quality beer and pub food can also be found at Breckenridge Brewery, about one block up and six blocks over, directly across from Coors Field. Locals will tell you the place is known for its Avalanche Ale, but it also serves small-batch brews, and we recommend that true connoisseurs try those.

Just a few blocks over, you'll find Flying Dog Breweries, a sassy joint that boasts bold, inventive brews and an ambience that invokes a smattering of "the gonzo spirit." (What I mean by this will become clear when you go.) Also close is Sandlot Brewing Company, the only brewpub in existence to be housed inside a baseball stadium.

You also won't want to miss Rock Bottom Brewery on the 16th Street Mall. Though it is now a national chain, this Denver location was the first official Rock Bottom (named so as it was built at the bottom of the Prudential Building (hence the rock allusion). We suggest their "unsinkable" Molly's Titanic Brown Ale, which won the GABF gold medal at the festival in 2006.

The foam fans out far beyond LoDo and even beyond Denver, in fact. With eight breweries, the Boulder area is another fabulous drinking destination. True die-hards should lock in advance tickets for the Boulder County Brews Cruise (available at www.beertown.org). Attendees board one of two buses at the Great American Beer Festival site for an up-close tour of the Boulder region's key breweries. You'll go inside beer cellars, breweries, bottling/canning and other facilities. The tour is complete with samples of each stop's specialties. Past events have visited Boulder Beer Co., Left Hand Brewing Co., Oskar Blues Brewery & Pub, Redstone Meadery, the Pumphouse and others. Like the rest of your weekend at the GABF in Denver, the experience is bound to be not only festive and quenching, but also educational.

Where to Stay

While in Denver, you may as well stay at what Zagat 2006 deemed the "Best Hotel in Denver"—Hotel Teatro. I found that this four-star and four-diamond self-dubbed "urban sanctuary" lives up to its designation. Not only are the rooms appointed with every nicety for your convenience—yoga mat, meditation area, printer, and both bath and shower—heck, they'll even draw your own aromatherapy bath if you so wish. Did we mention its proximity to Denver Center for the Performing Arts and the Mobil Four Star Restaurant Kevin Taylor below?