

## BREW

## Stout constitution

Winter cries out for a dark, potent drop and breweries are rising to the challenge, writes **Willie Simpson**.

Card-carrying communists aside, you've got to love the sound of Russian Imperial Stout. Such highly potent dark brews are just the ticket for midwinter drinking and the style is enjoying something of a revival among local craft brewers.

In Canberra, Wig & Pen brewer Richard Watkins has knocked out an annual batch of Russian Imperial Stout for the past six years, which goes on tap each July 1.

This brute of a beer is thick and tarry, intensely roasty and the high alcohol (11 per cent) leaves a warming afterglow; even a two-year-old batch I sampled had mellowed only slightly.

It takes an awful lot of grain to produce a stout this high in alcohol and Watkins boosts it with dried malt extract. When I rang, he was brewing the 2008 batch because the stout undergoes a three-week primary fermentation, then is racked into casks for three months followed by a further three months on oak chips and then a final, lengthy conditioning period in kegs.

In Victoria, both the Red Duck and Red Hill breweries have launched versions of this robust style in recent weeks.

Red Hill Imperial Stout (8 per cent) balances massive hop bitterness with a deliciously roasty complexity, while Red Duck's the Ox (9.4 per cent) is more malt-driven, with coffee and bitter chocolate flavour notes.

This broad style of beer is sometimes also called Baltic porter or stout, because these robust, highly hopped export beers were originally made in Britain for the sea trade between Baltic and Scandinavian ports. Courage Imperial Russian Stout is one of the last reminders of the 200-year export trade. It was Catherine the Great who introduced this type of stout to the Tsarist court in the 19th century, when it officially became known as Imperial.

Sydney's Redoak brewery has most bases covered, producing a Baltic Porter and a Russian Imperial Stout; the Baltic Porter is more moderate in alcohol and features



Black gold ... David Hollyoak at Redoak Brewery. Photo: Fiona Morris

intriguing burnt sugar and sandalwood notes, while the hefty stout (10 per cent) balances considerable sweetness with a deep roastiness.

Lovers of porters and stouts are well catered for at the Redoak Boutique Beer Cafe, which serves Brown Porter, Holly Porter, Robust Porter, Oatmeal Stout, Irish Dry Stout, Export Stout and Belgium Chocolate Stout.

## TASTING NOTES

**Southwark Old Stout (7.4 per cent)**

A blockbuster, pitch-black stout. Intense roastiness in aroma; thick, molasses-laced palate, which is chewy with hints of blackcurrant and burnt sugar. Finishes with considerable alcoholic warmth.

**Red Hill Imperial Stout (8 per cent)**

Black with faint ruby highlights; dark beige-coloured head. Mocha and dark chocolate aromatics; palate is a confection of caramel, licorice, bitter chocolate and treacle, overlaid with a bitterness that outlasts everything. Lipsmacking, oily finish. [www.redhillbrewery.com.au](http://www.redhillbrewery.com.au).

**Wig & Pen Russian Imperial Stout (11 per cent)**

Impenetrably jet black. A tarry mouthful with layers of molasses, dark chocolate, roasty-toasty notes, plums, raisins and currants, all wrapped up in a dark, velvety, roasty finish. Sure to be still tasting good in 12 months. [www.wigandpen.com.au](http://www.wigandpen.com.au).

Local craft brewers may have jumped on the Imperial stout bandwagon but Southwark Old Stout can lay claim to being the trailblazer. This formidable stout is the strongest brew produced by a mainstream brewery. It enjoys a strong winter following in Adelaide pubs where it's sold by the glass poured from long-necks. As with all Imperial stouts, it's just the thing to chase down a wedge of ripe blue cheese.