

Altbier (German: old beer) is a style of beer brewed in the Rhineland, especially around the city of Düsseldorf, Germany. It is a copper-colored beer whose name comes from it being top-fermented, an older method than the bottom fermentation of lagers. (1)

It is a moderately colored, well-attenuated, bitter beer with a rich maltiness balancing a strong bitterness. Light and spicy hop character complements the malt. A dry beer with a firm body and smooth palate. (9)

For some history on the style and/or some sample recipes, check out this [article](#) on the Wizards website.

Variants

- Sticke (“secret”) alt, which is slightly stronger, darker, richer and more complex than typical alts. Bitterness rises up to 60 IBUs and is usually dry hopped and lagered for a longer time. (8)
- Doppelsticke, as its name implies, is a "doubled" version of the Sticke, making it something akin to a German Barleywine. (4)
- Münster alt is typically lower in gravity and alcohol, sour, lighter in color (golden), and can contain a significant portion of wheat. A more in depth description is This is discussed at the end of this article. Sometimes consumed with a dash of fresh fruit syrup stirred into the beer. (6)
- Per the 2021 guidelines, stronger sticke and doppelsticke beers should be entered in the 27 Historical Beer style instead. Munster Alt is no longer specifically mentioned in 2021 guideline.

Some brief BJCP history:

- The 2021 style guideline has a single style – 7B Altbier.
- The 2015 style guideline also had a single style – 7B Altbier. The text is different from 2021 but the content is similar enough.
- The 2008 style guideline had two altbier styles – 7A Northern German Altbier and 7C Dusseldorf Altbier.
 - The Northern style is generally darker, sometimes more caramelly, and usually sweeter and less bitter than Düsseldorf Altbier (8). A more detailed summary of differences according to Beersmith are summarized at the end of this article.
 - Why the Northern style disappeared from the guidelines is a mystery to me. Maybe it’s been subsumed into the Dusseldorf stye (which makes little sense if they’re really different)? The 2021 style guide appears to be focused on Dusseldorf style and most characteristics of the Northern style are not mentioned in the description.

2021 BJCP Style Guideline – 7B Altbier

	OG Range	FG Range	IBU Range	SRM Range	ABV Range
7B Altbier	1.044 – 1.052	1.008 – 1.014	25-50	9 - 17	4.3% - 5.5%
Overall Impression					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A moderately colored, well-attenuated, bitter beer with a rich maltiness balancing a strong bitterness. Light and spicy hop character complements the malt. A dry beer with a firm body and smooth palate. 					
Appearance					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The color ranges from amber to deep copper, stopping short of brown; bronze-orange is most common. Brilliant clarity. Thick, creamy, long-lasting off-white head. 					

Aroma	
•	Malty and rich with grainy characteristics like baked bread or nutty, toasted bread crusts. Should not have darker roasted or chocolate notes. Malt intensity is moderate to moderately-high. Moderate to low hops complement but do not dominate the malt, and often have a spicy, peppery, or floral character. Fermentation character is very clean. Low to medium-low esters optional.
Flavor	
•	Malt profile similar to the aroma, with an assertive, medium to high hop bitterness balancing the rich malty flavors. The beer finishes medium-dry to dry with a grainy, bitter, malty-rich aftertaste. The finish is long-lasting, sometimes with a nutty or bittersweet impression. The apparent bitterness level is sometimes masked by the malt character if the beer is not very dry, but the bitterness tends to scale with the malt richness to maintain balance. No roast. No harshness. Clean fermentation profile. Light fruity esters, especially dark fruit, may be present. Medium to low spicy, peppery, or floral hop flavor. Light mineral character optional.
Mouthfeel	
•	Medium body. Smooth. Medium to medium-high carbonation. Astringency low to none.

Brewing Techniques (2021 BJCP Style Guideline – 7B Altbier)

Mash

- A step mash program is traditional. (9). While mentioned as traditional in the BJCP, most articles don't call for this and it isn't necessary (3).

Mash/Grist

- Grist varies, but usually consist of German base malts (usually Pils, sometimes Munich) with small amounts of crystal, chocolate, or black malts. May include some wheat, including roasted wheat. (9)
- Since the beer ferments so well and attenuates fully, to get the touch of residual sweetness that is appropriate in this beer, you can use a Crystal or Caramel malt which will leave some sweetness and body in the finished beer. Caramunich is a good choice, but keep the percentage low, at around 5% so it doesn't seem too sweet. (2)
- Carafa Special malts can be used to get the desired color (I use Carafa Special II).
- Melanoidin Malt can be used to boost maltiness without going to the trouble of a decoction mash (7)

Mash/Water

- Here are some samples to choose from. Amber Dry seems to be one of the most recommended in the forums but you can see all are close.

Source	Profile	Calcium	Magnesium	Sodium	Sulfate	Chloride	SU:CL
Brunwater	Dusseldorf	40	15	25	80	45	1.8
Brunwater	Dusseldorf (boiled)	39	15	25	80	45	1.8
Brunwater	Amber Dry	50	15	15	110	50	2.2
Palmer (median)	Dusseldorf Altbier	100	15	50	150	75	2.0
Brewer's Friend	Dusseldorf City	90	12	45	82	65	1.3
	Final Four Average	70	14	34	106	59	1.8

Mash/Temperature

- Mash Temp at 148-150°F (low temperature to get highly fermentable wort) (2, 11)

Hops

- Most examples have a balanced (25-35 IBU) bitterness, not the aggressive hop character of the well-known Zum Uerige. (9)
- Spalt hops are traditional, but other traditional German or Czech hops can be used. (9)
 - Possible other candidates could be Tettnang, Hallertau, Liberty or Saaz
 - But you can use any clean, neutral bittering hops such as Perle, Northern Brewer, Mount Hood, Magnum, Nugget, Galena or Horizon
- If flavor or aroma hops are used, keep with a single addition, keep it restrained, and of course keep it noble. (5)
 - Sources vary on when to add these hops but the 30-minute mark is mentioned more often than anything else

Boil Time

- Suggested boil times range from 60-90 minutes although you may want to consider 90 minutes due to the use of pilsner malt if you buy into the theory it drives off DMS. (12)

Yeasts

- Use a clean, highly attenuative ale yeast. (3, 9)
- Wyeast ->1007 German Ale (ferment at 55-68°F), 2565 Kolsch, 1010 American Wheat, 1275 Thames Valley (10)
- White Labs – WLP011 European Ale Yeast (ferment at 65-70°F), WLP029 Kölsch Ale Yeast, WLP036 Dusseldorf Alt Ale Yeast (10)
- Safe Ale – K97 German Ale (ferment at 64.4-78.8°F) - one of my best Alt beers! (10)
- Can also use Wyeast 1056 with very favorable results (why? a clean yeast, highly attenuative yeast just like the description says)

Fermentation

- Ferment at cool ale temperatures, then cold condition. (9)
- Ferment at 60-61°, never exceed 63°. (3, 11)
 - Although you might want to temper this based on the yeast used (eg, WLP011 and K97 temps start at 64°F)

Lagering

- After fermentation lager your beer for 3 to 8 weeks at around 40°F although most articles point to somewhere around the 3-4 week range to mellow out the hops, smooth out any rough edges and help with beer clarity. (2, 5, 11)

Carbonation

- Medium to medium-high carbonation (9)
- Everyone has an opinion; the range is from 2.1 -3.3 with the majority around 2 ½ volumes

Service

- “Altbier is typically served in tall cylindrical 0.2 liter (~6 oz) 'becher' glasses which are similar to Kolsch 'stange' glasses, although slightly shorter and fatter. The idea behind the small glass is that the beer stays fresh and cold as it doesn't sit around for long.” (13)



Differences Between the Northern and Dusseldorf Styles of Altbier (3)

While both the Northern and Dusseldorf Styles of Altbier have similarities, such as grist, OG/FG and carbonation, there are some differences

- The Dusseldorf style has medium bitterness is slightly more bitter than Northern German Altbier.
- The Northern version generally has a slight caramel flavor and is sweeter and less bitter than the Dusseldorf. The Northern style may have a malty, grainy, biscuity and even slight caramel maltiness.
- The Dusseldorf style color runs bronze to brown, or 11-17 SRM. The Northern can be slightly darker at 13-19 SRM.
- The Dusseldorf style may use moderately carbonate water to accentuate the bitterness of the hops while the Northern style typically does not use carbonate water.
- The Northern version is sometimes made with a mix of ale and lager yeasts or even a highly attentive lager yeast alone.

References

1. Wikipedia, [Altbier](#)
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5. Homebrew Academy, [How to Brew Altbier](#)
6. All About Beer Magazine, [Brewing German Rarities](#)
7. Bruccrafter, [Homebrew Ingredient Spotlight: Melanoidin Malt](#)
8. 2008 BJCP Style Guideline
9. 2021 BJCP Style Guideline
10. Wyeast, White Labs and Fermentis Websites
11. Jamil & Jon 6-19-06 Podcast
12. MoreBeer, [60, 90, or Otherwise: Finding the Best Boil Times](#)
13. The Electric Brewery, [Dusseldorf Altbier](#)