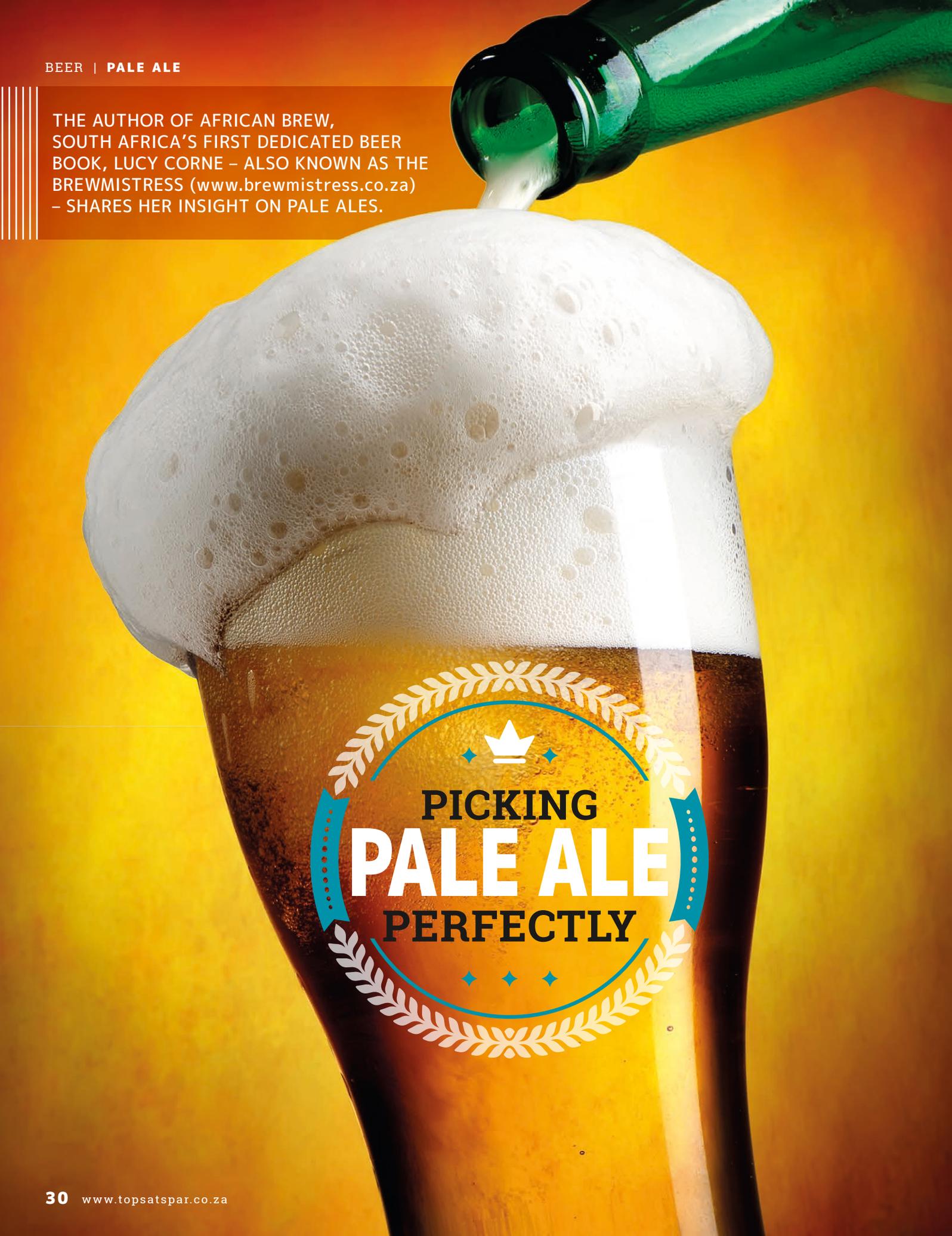


THE AUTHOR OF AFRICAN BREW, SOUTH AFRICA'S FIRST DEDICATED BEER BOOK, LUCY CORNE – ALSO KNOWN AS THE BREWMISTRESS (www.brewmistress.co.za) – SHARES HER INSIGHT ON PALE ALES.



PICKING
PALE ALE
PERFECTLY

A few years ago, finding anything other than a golden lager in a South African liquor store was a tall order. There were plenty of brands – lagers from South Africa, lagers from other African countries and indeed lagers from the rest of the world. Regardless of where it came from, the beer inside your bottle, can or keg was all the same style.

Then the so-called craft revolution arrived and our beer landscape was changed forever. Now our fridges are full of stouts and saisons, pilsners and porters, witbier, weissbier and many, many versions of pale ale.

Pale ale is a wide-reaching beer category. Its degree of “paleness” can vary from yellow-gold to a light copper colour; its alcohol content wavers from as low as 3% ABV to upwards of 6% and its flavours change quite substantially depending on the malt, hops and yeast chosen for each particular brew.

It all began in the late 17th century. New kilning methods meant that maltsters – those who transform plain old barley into wonderful malt – could at last produce paler malts. Until then, technology – or the lack thereof – had only allowed for darker malts which meant that drinkers were limited to darker ales such as porter, brown ale and stout. The new, lighter beers were referred to as ‘pale ale’ and the name kind of stuck.

Fast forward a couple of hundred years and the style has been both refined and expanded upon. There are now vague guide-lines suggesting what a pale ale should look like, smell and taste but today we also have numerous types of pale ale. Even a casual browse of local liquor store shelves will reveal American pale ales and English pale ales, Belgian pale ale, India pale ale and of course, South African pale ale. So what’s the difference between them all? Well, it basically comes down to the ingredients chosen for each particular brew.

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1

AMERICAN PALE ALE

One of the most sought-after and oft-brewed craft beer styles, American Pale Ale (or APA for short) as we know it dates back only a few decades. It was 1980 when California brewery Sierra Nevada released their pale ale using fruity US hops. This flawless beer remains a benchmark for the style and an inspiration to brewers around the world. APA is a hop-forward, easy-drinking beer, light on malt flavours and not too strong in alcohol (usually around 4.5 - 5.5% ABV). Expect aromas of passion fruit, pine trees, citrus or peaches, with just a touch of toasty or caramel-like malt flavour to keep things somewhat balanced. It’s an iconic craft beer style around the world and South Africa is no exception. My advice is to track down local versions from Devil’s Peak Brewing Company, Lakeside Brew Works, That Brewing Company and Clarens Brewery. Cape Brewing Company’s canned Pale Ale is a great lead into the style – not so hoppy, a bit less bitter and very, very quaffable.



2

ENGLISH PALE ALE

These days the term ‘English Pale Ale’ has fallen out of favour, replaced by a range of other styles that fit within the parameters of what a pale ale should be. Look out for English bitter or golden ale if you want a British take on the pale ale. English hops tend to be more muted, subtle and slightly spicier than its American counterpart. Instead of fruit salad and forest floor, expect earthy, woody, peppery aromas from the English-style pale ales. It’s not just about hops though: English beers tend to be defined by their malt character. Look for biscuit, toast and perhaps a hint of toffee shining through alongside the chosen hops. English styles are under-represented in South Africa, but hunt down Bosun’s Bitter from Mitchell’s, Woodstock Brewery’s Rhythm Stick, the English ales from Copper Lake, Cockpit and Swagga, plus Dissident Brewing Company’s golden ale.



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3

SOUTH AFRICAN PALE ALE

So if an APA is American because its hops hail from there, and an English bitter is English due to the home-grown malts, what makes a South African pale ale South African? Well, a bit of both – both hops and malt that is. Many South African craft brewers like to stick to local ingredients; it keeps things proudly South African and helps to keep the cost of your beer down. Some SA pale ales will use all local malt (produced in Caledon) and hops (grown in George) while others spice things up a little by using imported speciality malts to give a greater depth of flavour. Check out Jack Black's Cape Pale Ale, Standaaven's No. 7 African Pale Ale or Two Okes South African Pale Ale.

ABOVE:
"We'll drink to that!"
South African, American, British or Indian – they all taste good.



4

INDIA PALE ALE

Here's where it gets a bit confusing, for none of the ingredients in an India Pale Ale have been anywhere near the subcontinent... There are so many stories and legends surrounding the origin of the style that books have been written on the topic. Let's just say that back in the 19th century, pale ale, along with the longer-established darker beers, started being shipped to the British colonies, including India. Today though, the IPA has little to do with the beers the Raj might have enjoyed with their tiffin.

One beer writer described his first IPA as being like "drinking in colour for the first time".

BEER IPA

The easiest way to think of an IPA is as a pale ale on steroids. So an American IPA is stronger in alcohol (at least 5.5%, rising to around 7.5%), more bitter than a pale ale and with massive whiffs of pleasantly pungent American hops. American IPAs are all about hops and can be a bit of an acquired taste – though once you've acquired it, you'll never see lager the same way again. One beer writer described his first IPA as being like "drinking in colour for the first time".

English IPAs are a touch more balanced – you will find evidence of malt in the aroma and flavour, though balance is not a key component to any IPA. Expect a bitter, crisp, fairly dry beer with alcohol in the range of 5 – 6.5% and aromas of pepper and flowers. As with the pale ales, American versions end to be more popular in South Africa than English ones. Fine examples include Devil's Peak's The King's Blockhouse, Riot's Valve, Drifter Brewing Company's Scallywag, Agar Brewery's Tomahawk and Giant IPA from Aegir Project. If it's an English IPA that you seek, try Atlantic Storm's Red Coat or Citizen's Saboteur.

Whether you go for the subtle, the bitter, the massively hopped or the proudly local, pale ales are guaranteed thirst quenchers, perfect for sipping on while you flip the meat on the braai. And with summer here, I think we can all drink to that. 🍷