

Utopias is an expensive, limited-release, dark ale from Samuel Adams that shares characteristics with port, old cognac, or fine sherry.

# Luxury Brews

The allure of high-end craft beer

BY TRACY KALER

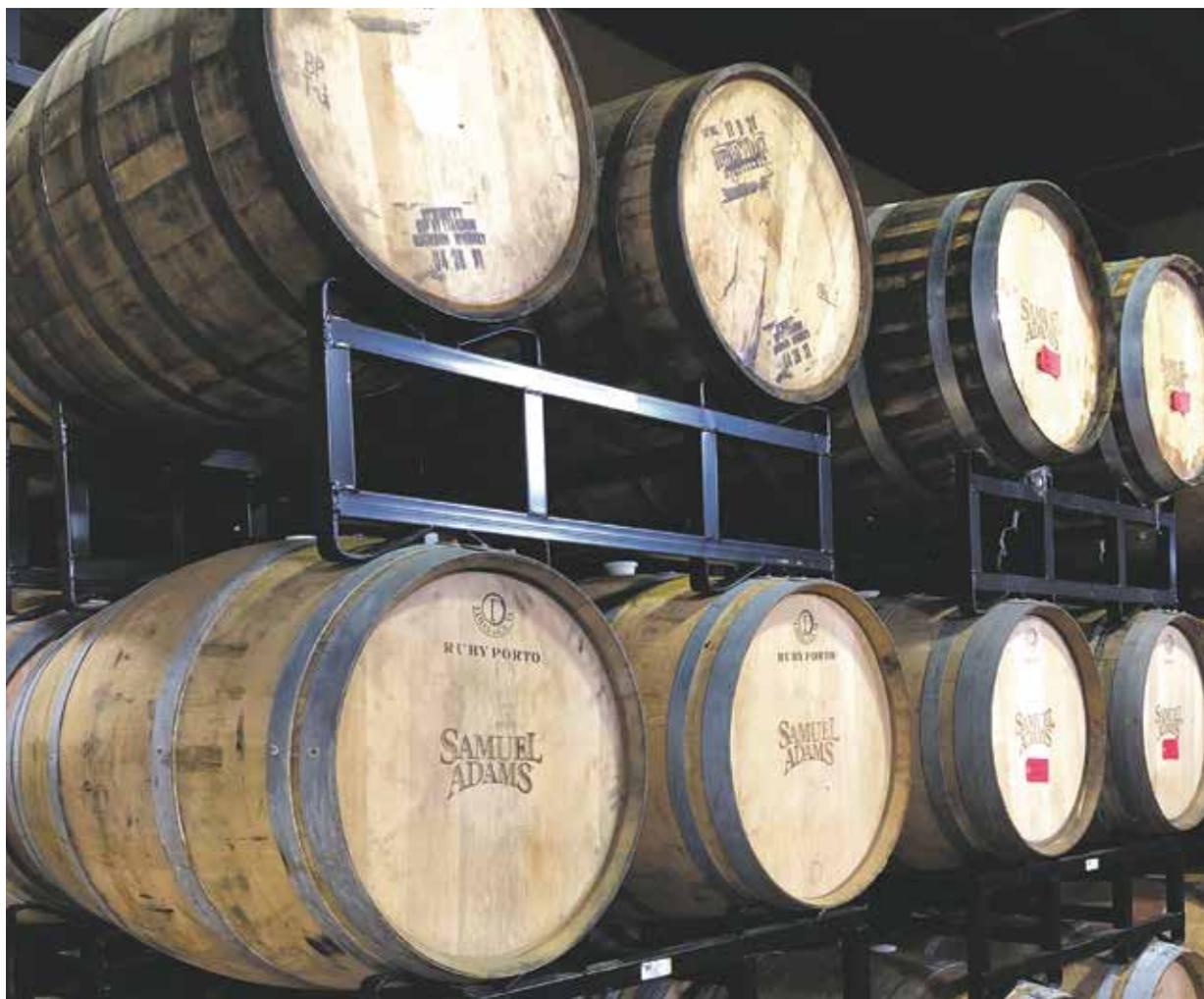
From pale ales to dark lagers to Belgian-style brews, craft beer ranges from crispy to hoppy, bitter to sour, and fruity to funky, with distinct flavor profiles running the gamut. Garnering a cult-like following in recent years, the upper echelon of craft beer—selling for \$40, \$50 and higher for rare bottles—continues to gain traction as drinkers seek out limited-edition, sought-after brews, often shelving bottles for a special occasion or adding a vintage to their growing craft collection.

As one of the craft pioneers in the U.S., Samuel Adams put high-end craft beer on the beverage map. The company introduced Triple Bock in 1994—then deemed the world’s strongest beer with an 18% ABV (alcohol by volume)—and the 20% ABV MMM Millennium in 2000, before debuting the famed Utopias in 2002.

“Over 20 years ago, when drinkers and brewers were trying to get their hands on the lightest beer possible, I couldn’t help but imagine the exact opposite kind of beer,” says Jim Koch, founder and brewer at Samuel Adams. “One so extreme, sophisticated, and flavorful that it would challenge expectations and traditional conventions of beer itself.”

Utopias, a limited-release dark ale blend boasting characteristics of a vintage port, old cognac, or fine sherry, also happens to be America’s most expensive craft

Samuel Adams



**Samuel Adams Utopias is barrel-aged in wooden casks, seen at left.**

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KATHRYN PREISSINGER

beer, with a suggested retail price of \$210 per bottle. Made from a blend of previous batches of Sam Adams brews, the ruby-black Utopias is aged in used spirits barrels, a process that Mr. Koch spearheaded in the industry. “Before I knew it, I found myself exploring the uncharted territory of barrel-aging beers, breaking rules and boundaries,” Mr. Koch says. “This

process was the foundation for Utopias.”

Mr. Koch’s “labor of love” is released biennially in odd years, with the most recent vintage (just 77 wooden casks were produced) revealed in 2019. While the brew’s complex flavor attracts craft-beer enthusiasts, the elegant packaging is also part of its allure. “A porcelain decanter modeled after our copper brew kettles and a custom snifter glass allow drinkers to enjoy a taste of Utopias now and savor it for years to come,” he says.

Since Utopias has a 28% ABV, this nutty, full-bodied beverage isn’t meant to be quaffed, but is best enjoyed in one-ounce pours, similar to a fine spirit. Mr. Koch explains that Utopias offers a drinking experience so unique that it’s allowed only limited release and distribution. And due to its high alcohol content, the beer is illegal in 15 states.

Samuel Adams likely prompted other breweries to pursue high-end, small-batch beer, as the brewery raised the bar over the past few decades. “It’s interesting if you look into the beer market. There truly hasn’t been a super-premium beer segment for that long,” says Tomme Arthur, co-founder and chief operating owner of Lost Abbey Brewing in San Marcos, California. “We used

to have light lager and craft beer, then came a whole new range of beers you bought but didn't drink right away."

Mr. Arthur says consumers understand that beer, under the right conditions, will age appropriately and mature for many years. "The team at Lost Abbey Brewing has seen a resurgence in people looking for beers to store in their cellars," he says, similar to a great bottle of wine.

A hot seller is Lost Abbey's Cable Car. A blonde sour barrel-aged in French oak, this brew exhibits lemon with a trace of creaminess. Brewed for the iconic Toronado Bar in San Francisco, a current bottle costs in the \$50 range, but older vintages can sell for \$250 or higher.

Similarly, Lost Abbey's Cable Car Kriek, a bubbly wild ale released by the brewery in 2011, spills out flavors of sour cherry, grape, and plum. That bottle has a record of selling for a steep \$1,500 in 2016. Mr. Arthur confirms that the desire for these high-end bottles remains strong. "There is definitely a market for these beers moving forward," he says.

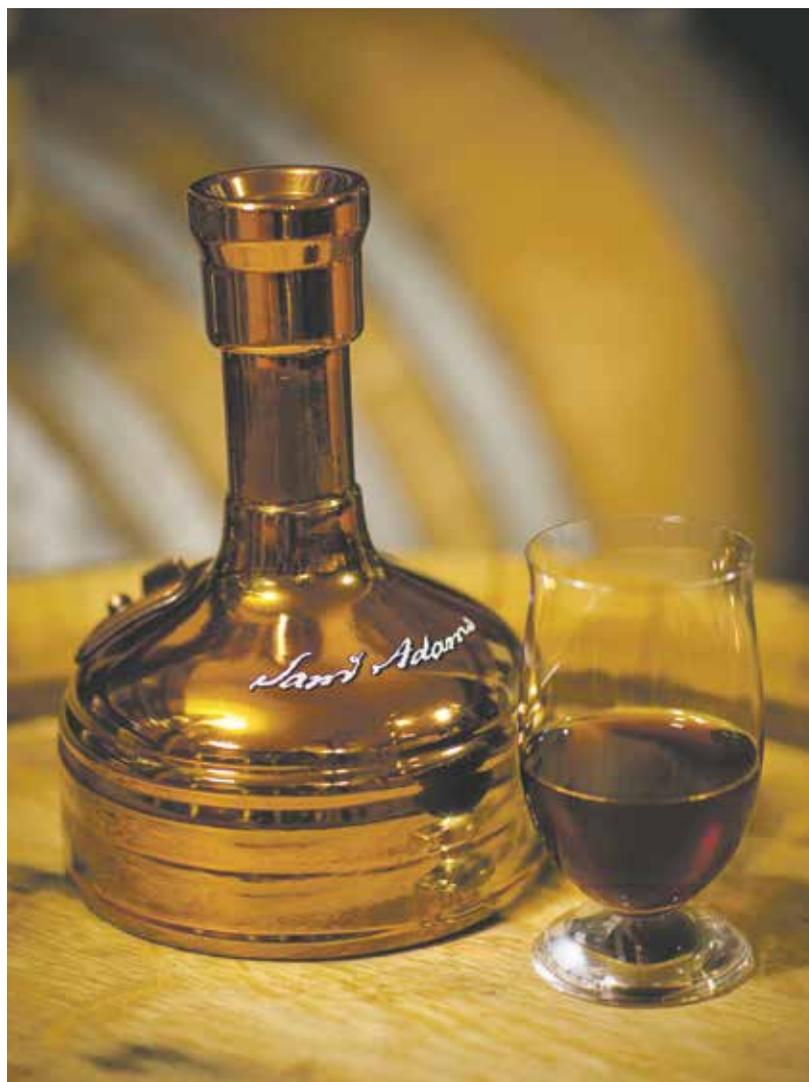
When it comes to the cost of craft beer, the quality of ingredients, time invested, and nuances of the brewing process ultimately influence each product's pricing. "Higher-priced craft beer comes down to the craft itself," says Kathryn Preissinger, public-relations coordinator at Tavour, a Seattle-based startup that has partnered with more than 600 independent craft breweries to deliver beer across the country.

One brewery catering to the luxury market is 3 Fonteinen. Their Hommage Bio Frambozen (season 18|19) Blend No. 42 (\$61.99) exudes the fruitiness of rich raspberries and sour cherries along with robust effervescence. "This brewery spent years understanding the true craft of Lambic [a Belgian-style sour beer], and was able to create some of the most amazing in the business," she says.

Some of Tavour's other high-end bestsellers include Anchorage Brewing Company's A Deal with The Devil (\$50), a barley wine highlighting the richness of wood, molasses, and cognac; as well as the entire collection by Side Project Brewing, based in Maplewood, Missouri. One of note is Maple in the Wood (\$45), a wheat beer aged 18 months in bourbon barrels. The brew offers a balanced medley of leathery whiskey, caramel, toffee, vanilla, and dark fruit on the palate.

Like Utopias, a pricey beer can be an "extreme" beer—where brewers push the limits during the brewing process—so the batch finishes with an unusual and unexpected taste, or even what one could perceive as a lack of harmony in the finished pour.

For the makers, spending countless hours perfecting their product is par for the course, and perhaps what the art of craft beer is all about. Ms. Preissinger says, "While the \$10 bottle is still delightful, when you add that extra time and care, you can create something truly magical." ■



**Samuel Adams Utopias is the most expensive craft beer for sale in the U.S., with a suggested price of \$210 per bottle.**