

A Lid On History

THE BEER STEIN FROM MEDIEVAL NECESSITY TO MODERN ICON

If you're partial to a beer, have you ever been brave enough to tackle a stein? Measuring a full liter, the traditional German beer glass is more than double a stateside pint serving. With Oktoberfest's libations and lederhosen looming large on the horizon, now is a good time to raise a stein in celebration.

These iconic vessels weren't always the dimpled, oversized pint glasses you find today. Once adorned with intricate designs and topped with pewter lids, steins are steeped in centuries of tradition, craftsmanship, and Black Death-defeating power.

MEDIEVAL ORIGINS: PRACTICALITY MEETS ART

The story of beer steins begins centuries ago in medieval Europe—specifically, in what is now Germany. Back then, sanitation was a luxury, drinking water was unsafe, and the bubonic plague was running rampant. Thus, beer—a boiled beverage—was a safer alternative. Initially, these early beer vessels were simple, practical mugs made of stoneware ("stein" means "stone" in German) designed to keep beer cooler for longer periods and prevent contamination.

As craftsmanship evolved, so did the beer stein. Around the 14th century, European potters started producing stoneware vessels that were not only functional but also charmingly ornate. These early steins featured

VILLEROY AND BOCH. GIRL HOLDING SAFETY BICYCLE. STEIN, ETCHED, INLAY. 1900. COLLECTION OF THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF CERAMIC ART; GIFT OF BOB AND COLETTE WILSON. (FOREGROUND). PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF CERAMIC ART. AMOCA.ORG



intricate designs—some by Renaissance artists—and sturdy handles. Motifs included biblical and historical scenes, often adorned with cobalt blue glazes.

THE RISE OF THE PEWTER LID

One unmistakable feature of traditional beer steins is the pewter lid. This addition came about during the time of the Black Plague in the 16th century, when it was believed that the disease could spread through the air. To protect themselves, beer drinkers began using lids on their steins, which could be opened and closed with a thumb lever.

This practical measure not only kept out bothersome bugs and debris but also added a touch of uniqueness to each stein, as craftsmen began to personalize them with engravings and embossment.

FROM PERSONAL UTILITY TO CULTURAL ICON

By the 19th century, beer steins had become indelibly intertwined with Bavarian culture and identity. Each stein could tell a story—whether of regional or familial pride or of celebration. For noble German families, porcelain and silver steins were status symbols upon which the household crest or shield was engraved. For the less well-heeled, glass or pewter steins with enameled folk art were common; these displayed scenes from everyday life or pictures of regional landmarks.

The cultural significance of steins peaks in Oktoberfest, the legendary beer festival that originated in Munich in 1810. During Oktoberfest, beer steins have always taken center stage.

Festivities kick off with the ceremonial tapping of the first keg, after which liters upon liters of beer are poured into steins and eagerly consumed. With its capacity to hold generous portions and a rich historical resonance, the giant stein has become a symbol of camaraderie and conviviality.

A RATHER MODERN STEIN RENAISSANCE

Perhaps spurred by the 21st-century explosion of craft beer and microbrewing culture, there has been a resurgence of thirst for traditional beer steins—both as collectibles and as functional items. Discerning sippers and trendy taprooms have rediscovered a penchant for the hefty, dimpled tankard, while passionate collectors and enthusiasts seek out vintage and artisanal steins.

For the global community of collectors, these receptacles can hold some serious value. Early-era steins are the most expensive, with one 18th-century sterling silver version selling for over \$2,200 in 2022. Early 20th-century Art Nouveau-style steins can fetch a few hundred dollars, while ultra-rare World War II-era military steins can command over a thousand.

BUYING STEINS

If you fancy acquiring a classic German stein, how do you ensure it's the real deal? In the late 19th century, the Merchandise Marks Act of 1887 was passed, which mandated that any authentic German beer stein made after 1887 was marked with "Made in Germany" on its base.

Naturally, pewter lids will darken over time, so the darker the lid is, the older (and more valuable) it may be. Traditional German brands that still make authentic steins include KING, Thewalt, Zoeller & Born, and Zimmerman. Although one liter is the traditional stein size, you'll be able to find capacities ranging from 0.25 to an epic 2.5 liters.

So, the next time you raise a stein at Oktoberfest or enjoy a cold brew with friends, take a moment to appreciate the rich history behind this beloved tradition. Each sip connects you to centuries of craftsmanship, community, and celebration—a history that continues to unfold with every clink and reminds us of the enduring bond between beer lovers across the globe.