

# A Trout Bum's Guide to Montana Craft Beer

By Jesse Bussard

Montana is known to many as a fly-fishing Mecca. World-class blue-ribbon trout streams pepper the state and we have some of the best stream access laws in the country. It's no wonder why so many anglers, including myself choose to put our roots down here.

Similarly, Big Sky Country is quick becoming a premiere destination for quality craft beer. With 58 breweries currently in operation across the state and another 5 in planning, Montana's craft beer culture is strong and growing. The Montana Brewers Association estimates the state's craft breweries produce 140,000 barrels or 4.3 million gallons of beer annually and generate nearly \$36 million in state revenue.

Montana fly fishermen have caught on to these facts and, like fish to water, are coming to appreciate the local libations brewers are offering up. Whether its beers on the boat, a cold drink after a long hike to fish a backcountry lake, or a stop at the taproom on the way home from the river, Montana craft beer is accessible, portable, and readily available to anglers in a variety of canned, bottled, and refillable forms.

Given my background as a homebrewer, beer geek, and aspiring trout bum, Montana Fly Fishing Magazine asked me to offer up some river-craft brewery pairings to help make the beer decision-making process a little easier. While this list is far from complete, what follows is an east-to-west rundown of four well-known Montana rivers and nearby craft breweries which offer up beer options to please everyone from craft beer newbies to the most discerning of beer connoisseurs.



## Bighorn River



Approximately 60 miles southwest of the confluence of the Bighorn and Yellowstone Rivers is Billings, Montana, the closest major urban hub and beer scene. This city which is home to the state's first brewpub (in 1994) is no stranger to craft beer and now boasts seven breweries with options to fit variety of beer drinker preferences.





First up on the list of recommended stops is **Canyon Creek Brewing Company** (3060 Gabel Road), the newest brewery on the block of Billings' beer scene. Started by long-time homebrewer turned pro, Ron Kalvig, in the fall of 2013, this brewery sits on the west end of town in what is considered Billings' commercial center. Canyon Creek's name is derived from a creek which runs through the town and one which Kalvig says he has many fond memories of floating as a teenager.

Canyon Creek maintains a complement of 10 to 12 beers on tap at all times. While beer is currently only available on-tap, a stainless steel insulated growler filled with your choice of tasty beverage can make a great addition to any Bighorn float. Most recently, Canyon Creek took home three national awards in the North American Beer Awards held annually in Idaho – Gold for their “MinPin Pils” pilsner, Gold for the “Copper “Scotch-Style Heavy, and a Silver medal for “Rabbit Head Red” Irish-Style Red Ale – proving their beers are as blue ribbon worthy as the Bighorn itself.

#### RECOMMENDED:

Beerhenge Hefeweizen,  
5.5% ABV

Celebrate your catch of the day with this American-style wheat beer. Without the signature banana and clove flavors of its German cousin, this beer is easy-drinking, light, refreshing, and not too hoppy.

C4 IPA, 6.00% ABV

For those hot days, the citrusy C4 IPA can hit the spot. Featuring a strong grapefruit and orange aroma, this IPA's citrusy flavor blends well with the balanced malt profile. The hop bill includes Cascade, Centennial, Columbus, and Chinook hops for aroma and bittering, as well as a final dry hop addition of Cascade after fermentation.

Opened in July of 2007, **Carter's Brewing** (2526 Montana Avenue-B) <http://cartersbrewing.com/>) is located on historic Montana Avenue sitting along the railroad tracks which pass through downtown Billings. The brewery is named after owner and head brewer, Michael Ulrich's first son, Carter James, and operates on a 7-barrel brew system pieced together from old dairy tankage and other modern additions.



Given their proximity to the train tracks, Carter's beers and décor feature a train theme. Committed to diversity, this brewery likely boasts one of the largest beer portfolios in Montana maintaining a dedicated taps for its eight flagship beers and an additional eight taps for seasonal and special edition brews throughout the year. Beer is available on-tap in the brewery taproom and at several locations around Billings. Carter's focus on variety and quality lends itself well to more adventurous craft beer drinkers.

#### RECOMMENDED:

Coldwater Kolsch, 5% ABV

This German style blond ale brewed with wheat and barley malts and lightly hopped for a clean crisp finish. This beer is a refreshing and flavorful “session-style” ale perfect for summer.

DeRailed IPA – 6.5% ABV

As Carter's best-selling beer, this beer's massive hop profile and rich English malt profile make it a very balanced and drinkable IPA.



# ÜBERBREW

Located just a stone's throw up Montana Avenue from the last brewery is **Überbrew** (2305 Montana Avenue, [uberbrewmt.com](http://uberbrewmt.com)). The brewery's name is derived from owners Mark Hastings and Jason Shroyer's desire to offer more than just a cold pint to its patrons. Instead, as the word 'uber' implies, Überbrew offers up a complete package experience focused on quality beer and food pairings, a relaxing atmosphere, and music from local artists.

Operating a 10-barrel brewhouse, Überbrew's beer portfolio is diverse featuring options for a spectrum of beer drinkers from German styles to ultra-hopped IPAs. Beer is available on-site at the brewpub and in many locations across the state. For those looking for portability and convenience, Überbrew also sells its signature flagship brew, White Noise Hefeweizen in bottled 6-packs.

## RECOMMENDED:

White Noise Hefeweizen, 5.7% ABV

Stop by the local bottle shop on the way to the river for a 6-pack of bottles of this medium-bodied American-style Hefeweizen brewed with German malt and hops. This moderately sweet and lightly bitter wheat beer has flavor to please with a light aroma of wheat, banana, fruit, and toasted grains.

Golden Ticket, 5.04%

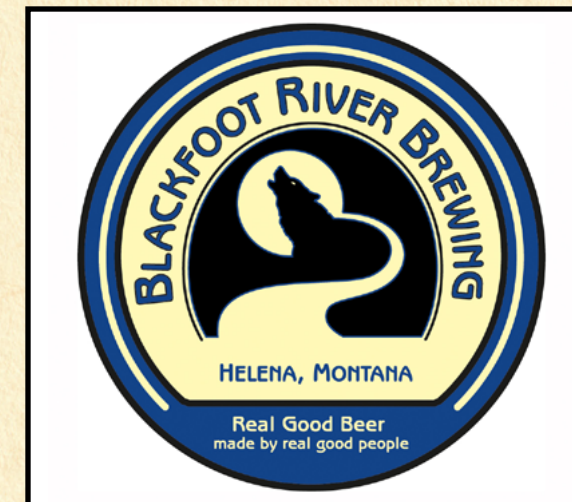
An English-style summer ale, this beer is brewed with English malts and German and American hops. With a crisp hop profile and light, sweet malts this pale golden ale is the "ticket to summer refreshment."



Special thanks to the Montana Brewers Association for their help in gathering the materials necessary for the making of this article.

# Missouri River

For those planning a trip to fish this Montana river favorite, two options exist for local craft beer stops, the state capital of Helena and Great Falls. Currently two breweries operate in Helena and a third is set to open later this year. Great Falls is home to three operating breweries and is also home to Montana's only malting company which supplies many of the state's craft breweries.



Started by three avid homebrewers in late 1998, **Blackfoot River Brewing** (66 South Park Avenue, [blackfootriverbrewing.com](http://blackfootriverbrewing.com)) calls downtown Helena home. Starting with a 7-barrel brew system, the brewery has since expanded production since moving to its new location in 2008. It now operates on a 15-barrel Bavarian brew system producing a unique variety of styles.

On average, Blackfoot River releases a new beer every two weeks and is the largest brewery in Montana to not filter its beer, a practice believed to add body and flavor to the drink. In addition to their signature beers, Blackfoot River also runs an active barrel-aging program producing specialty beers such as sour ales. Beer is available on draught-only in the taproom and in various locations around Helena.



Photo courtesy of Blackfoot River Brewing

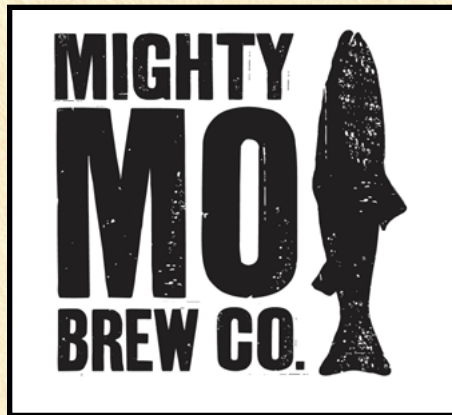


**RECOMMENDED:** Singlemalt IPA, 6.9% ABV

This beer is brewed from 100% Crisp Maris Otter floor-malted barley, an English malt, making for malt-rich, medium-bodied drinking experience. Generous hopping with Northwest grown hops such as Simcoe and Cascade impart a balanced hop flavor and aroma.

Norfolk Organic Porter, 7.2% ABV

For those cooler days on the river, consider pouring yourself a pint of this certified organic English-style brown porter. Brewed from certified organic malts and hops, this dark, full-bodied beer has a rich, roasted coffee-like flavor.



**Mighty Mo Brewing** (412 Central Avenue, <http://mightymobrewing.com/>) was the first craft brewery to call Great Falls home. Opening in December 2013, the brewery is located in the middle of downtown Great Falls offering up a line-up of high quality craft brews as well as great food and live music.

With strong ties to fly fishing and the Missouri River, this brewery's logo sports a trout and many of the beer names include fishing slang. Five standard beers reside on tap year-round, with a few seasonals being "caught and released" throughout the year.

**RECOMMENDED:** Rising Trout Pale Ale, 5.6% ABV

Reach for a Rising Trout after a long day on the river. This pale ale has a slightly bready malt flavor and up front and finished with tropical fruit flavors thanks to ample hopping with Cascade and Citra hops.

Lip Ripper IPA, 6.4% ABV

One of Mighty Mo's flagship beers, this India Pale Ale is brewed with floor-malted barley for a clean malt backbone. It is "hop bursted" with seven different hop varieties to impart big hop flavor and a citrusy, piney aroma.



Named after the formidable Rocky Mountain Front Range, **The Front Brewing Company** is located in Great Falls. The tasting room operates out of The Front Public House which doubles as a restaurant. The outdoors-theme continues through into their beers with names like River Water, Keep Cool, Mountain Man, and Day Hike.

In addition to their love for nature, The Front partners with distributors to give five cents back (<http://5centsback.org/>) on the number of beer cans sold to support local non-profits supporting outdoors recreation and education.

The Front cans three of its flagship beers - an IPA, Scotch Ale, and Blonde Ale - using a unique 16-ounce can design featuring a removable top for easy intake. The cans can be found for sale as retailers across the state. Growler fills are also available on-site at the Public House.

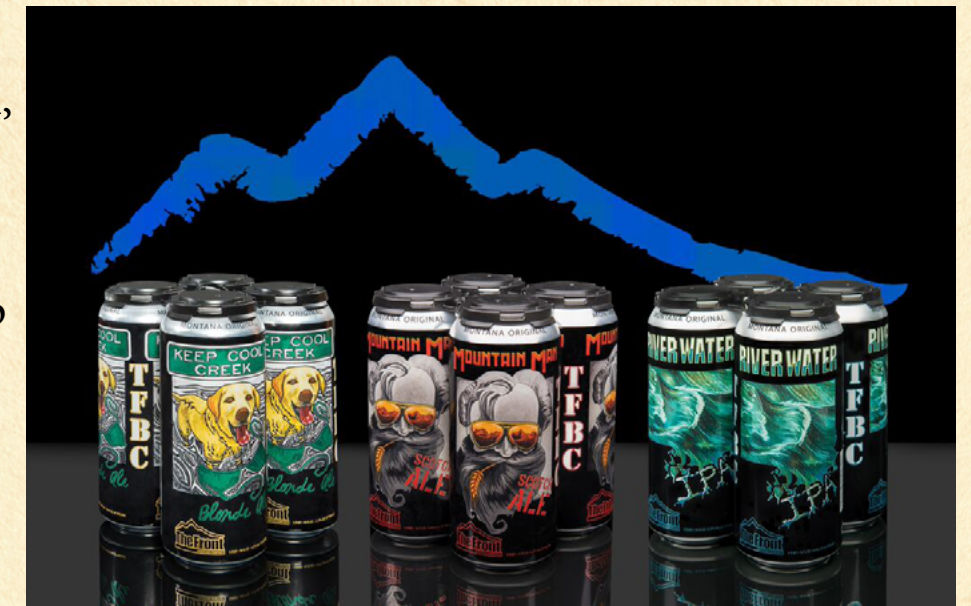


Photo courtesy of The Front Brewing Company

**RECOMMENDED:** Keep Cool Creek Blonde Ale, 5.4% ABV

This straw-colored ale is reminiscent of a cool mountain stream. Its smooth malt background coupled with a delicate hop tinge delivers a light and refreshing experience.

River Water IPA, 6.9% ABV

This beautiful deep golden orange unfiltered IPA was born for the river. The moderate malt background and generous palate of seven different hop varieties make this beer a medium-bodied, well-balanced worthy of any river outing.



# Madison River

On your way to the Madison, you will want to stock up on cold beverages at one of the Gallatin Valley's local breweries. With one brewery in Belgrade and another four in Bozeman, there are plenty of beer options available. Another three breweries are slated to open in Bozeman in the near future.



Located a short drive from its namesake river in the small town of Belgrade, **Madison River Brewing Company** (20900 Frontage Road, Building B, [www.madisonriverbrewing.com](http://www.madisonriverbrewing.com)) shares a common perspective found throughout

Montana's beer scene-enjoying craft beer while recreating outdoors. Starting in 2005, Madison River Brewing Company currently ranks fourth in the state for beer production with goals for continued expansion.

With beers named after trout flies, this brewery focuses aggressively on distributing their beers around Montana and surrounding states. You can find their beer in 12-ounce bottled 6-packs and 22-ounce single bottles. Growler fills are also available in the tasting room and the beer is found on tap at many establishments around the state.

**RECOMMENDED:** Hopper Pale Ale, 6.0% ABV

This strong pale ale is brewed with four different barley malts and moderate Horizon, Centennial, and Cascade hops. With a distinctive, citrus flavor and floral aroma, this medium-bodied beer is smooth and easy on the finish.

Salmon Fly Honey Rye Ale, 5.6% ABV

A subtle spiciness of rye, moderate hop additions, and a mild sweetness derived from local honey make this ale a pleasurable drinking beverage. It's unique blending of ingredients makes for a lighter bodied beer fitting for a gamut of beer tastes.

Found just off the N 7th Avenue exit of I-90 that passes through Bozeman, **406 Brewing Company** (101 East Oak Street, Suite D,

[www.406brewingcompany.com/](http://www.406brewingcompany.com/)) has been going against the grain of its other brewery counterparts since 2011 offering up an always rotating tap series of experimental beers year round. An active supporter of the community, 406 Brewing Company offers gallery space to local artists and features live music. The breweries ties to the outdoors are evident as well in their fundraising involvement with local hunting and fishing conservation-focused groups.



Change is the name of the beer game at 406 Brewing Company who brewed over 45 different beers in their first year of production with only 15 repeats. In addition to its beer list, the brewery has started offering a regular lunch and dinner menu of pizzas, sandwiches, soups, and artisan bread which incorporate the breweries beers and other local ingredients when available. Beer is currently available on draught-only in the tasting room. Both insulated stainless steel and glass growlers with the brewery logo are available for purchase.

**RECOMMENDED:** Continental Blonde, 5.3% ABV

Tasting more like a pilsner than a blonde, this clean, crisp ale is an easy-drinking and refreshing choice to pack along on the boat.

Hop Punch, 6.5%

This India Pale Ale is continuously evolving and incorporates an impressive hop bill, which at times can contain as many as 15 different hop varieties. Body is light to medium and a biscuity malt flavor combines well with the distinctive hop flavor and aroma burst.





Opened in 2001, **Bozeman Brewing Company** (504 N. Broadway, <http://bozemanbrewing.com> ) is Bozeman's oldest operating brewing establishment. The brewery started with a 7-barrel brewhouse and for the first five years of operation solely brewed for production. Since then, the brewery has expanded production to 20-barrels and opened a tasting room where patrons can get a pint and fill growlers at the source.

Bozeman Brewing Company's flagship beers such as Hopzone IPA, Plum Street Porter, Select Amber Ale, and Hefeweizen are available in 12-ounce can 6-packs at retail locations around Bozeman. In addition, the brewery recently started offering 12-ounce can 4-packs of seasonal beers. They plan to release a different canned seasonal every two to three months.

**RECOMMENDED:** Watershed Pale Ale, 5.5% ABV

The current seasonal available in 4-packs, this pale ale is golden-colored, medium-bodied, and has a pleasant floral, fruity aroma thanks to Amarillo and Citra hops. A portion of every keg sold benefits the Greater Gallatin Watershed Council to help preserve clean water.

Hopzone IPA, 7.0% ABV

Fruity, bold, and strong describe this India Pale Ale which will please even the most discerning hophead. Five malt and four hop varieties are combined to make this complex, yet balanced brew.

# Bitterroot River

The brewery options are plenty along the way to the Bitterroot River which flows through the scenic Bitterroot Valley. For those heading southbound on Route 93, consider stopping at one of the seven breweries (soon to be eight) in Missoula, the famous city where "a river runs through it." Breweries in Lolo, Stevensville, Hamilton, and Darby also offer up another handful of choices.



Located in the heart of Missoula a stone throw from the Clark Fork River, **Kettlehouse Brewing** (602 Myrtle Street (Southside Location), <http://kettlehouse.com/> ) is a good place to stop on a southbound trip to the Bitterroot. A second Northside Location at 313 North 1st Street, West also features a tasting room as well is home to the breweries canning operation, which they began in 2006.

Eight mainstay beers make up Kettlehouse's flagship line-up, along with a slew of seasonal and specialty beers and like the brewery's mission statement says, the quality of their beers matches up with that of the Montana's outdoor experiences. You will find three of this brewery's eight mainstay beers (including the two listed below) in 16-ounce 4-packs and 8-packs, as well as on tap at their two locations and other establishments across the state.



**RECOMMENDED:** Double Haul IPA, 6.5% ABV

A Missoulan favorite, this India Pale Ale is well-balance and packs a hardy punch of Cascade hops. In addition, this beer won a gold medal in its style category at the 2014 World Beer Cup Awards.

Eddy Out Pale Ale, 5.5% ABV

Another flagship beer, this pale ale also carries a healthy dose of Cascade hops aroma. Its flavor is characterized by a citrusy hoppiness which balances nicely with the slight biscuit malt character.



**Lolo Peak Brewing Company** (601 Brewery Way, [lolopeakbrewery.com](http://lolopeakbrewery.com)) opened its doors in in the summer of 2014. Featuring a large customized taproom, garden, community meeting roof and inviting mezzanine, this “cathedral of beer” has quick become a town hub. The brewery maintains 12 taps and pairs their beers with unique dishes.

While still quite the new kid on the block, this brewery has big plans for the future, recently announcing plans for expansion to build an 8,000-square-foot, two-story brewpub and restaurant in Missoula. Currently, Lolo Peak’s offers a diverse portfolio of beer styles available on draught -only. It’s location on the way to the Bitterroot River make it a great pit stop to fill up some growlers or grab a cold pint on the trip home.

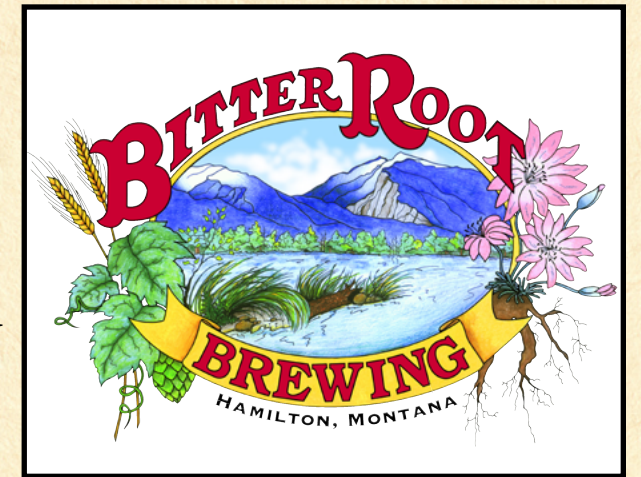
**RECOMMENDED:** Buffalo Trout Golden, 5.3% ABV

This “session-style” golden ale is a light, crisp, and refreshing choice featuring low hoppiness and muted citrusy undertones.

GSD Light Lager, 4.6% ABV

A clean, refreshing German-style lager, this beer is the perfect all-day drinking beer for on the boat or doing weekend chores around the house.

In production since 1998, **Bitter Root Brewing** (101 Marcus Street, [www.bitterrootbrewing.com](http://www.bitterrootbrewing.com)) makes its home in Hamilton, a town nestled in the heart of Montana’s Bitterroot Valley and a short walk from the Bitterroot River. Frequented by many of the local fly fishing guides, this brewery offers up tasty brews and food made-from-scratch on a daily basis like burgers and fish tacos.



Six beer styles are available year-round as well as a hodge-podge of rotators. Outdoors adventure-friendly options for beer from, Bitter Root Brewing include select beers in 12-ounce cans, 22-ounce bottles, as well as the standard growler fills. Kegs can also be purchased.

**RECOMMENDED:**

Single Hop Northwest Pale Ale, 6.5% ABV

Known as a “SMASH” beer, this pale ale is brewed with only a single malt and single hop variety. 100% Montana-grown and malted 2-row pale malt and Columbus hops make for a light, easy drinking beer with plenty of grapefruit and citrus aroma to please the palette.

Bitter Root Northwest IPA, 6.2% ABV

This IPA is loaded with Citra hops providing for a strong passion fruit flavor and grapefruit aroma. A great malt profile balances out the brew, making this the perfect beverage to kick back and relax after a day on the river.

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*For more information, visit:*

**Montana Brewers Association**, <http://montanabrewers.org/>

**Montana Beer Finder**, <http://www.montanabeerfinder.com/>

**Montana Beer: A Guide to Breweries in Big Sky Country** by Ryan Newhouse

Available for purchase here: [https://squareup.com/market/montana\\_beer\\_finder](https://squareup.com/market/montana_beer_finder)