

Amateur Brewer

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NEWSLETTER

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

BY

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Home Brew competitions have become almost as popular as amateur brewing itself, both here and in England, and they have done so for some very good reasons. They offer a chance to have your own best beer compared to others of its kind, and to obtain an independent assessment of your brewing skills. Then if you're a good brewer you can take pride in having that fact publicly proclaimed. If you are not so good, you may pick up some tips to help you improve. Different and interesting recipes may come your way, and you'll probably make some new friends into the bargain.

But is it really as simple and cosy as that? I have in mind a comment made by Jay Conner (Great Fermentations, San Rafael, CA), on the judging of the 'International' competition at the 1980 Home Wine and Beer Trade Association (HWBTA) Conference last April. Mr Conner said: "West Coast brews were most often termed 'overhopped'.... The grand prize winner from last year's statewide California contest was eliminated in Minneapolis for being overhopped." I could argue at length with that statement since I consider it virtually impossible to overhop an ale for a start. But that is not the point I wish to make here; instead I am interested in how it shows that there are fundamental problems in defining just exactly how beer should taste.

In a competition a judge can evaluate a beer only by its taste appearance and odor. He has no idea whether you have mashed or brewed from extract, or whether you have used a top- or bottom-fermenting yeast, or even how long you have matured the beer. He can know only what his eyes, nose and palate tell him. If he expects certain qualities in a particular type of beer, then he will fail one entered in that class if it is lacking in several of those characteristics. This means that you may have a loser, even though you brewed a beer which you and your colleagues considered to have exactly the right qualities for its type, simply because you have worked on a different definition from that used by the judge.

Many people may react to the above paragraph by saying that it's easy enough to tell a porter from a dark lager, or a pale ale from a Pilsner beer. And indeed it is, but what we're talking about here is the difference between two pilsners, and that's not so easy to pin down. One approach is to consider the characteristics of that type of beer as

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methods is the system of selecting categories. The English offer 9 very un-American groupings, California 7, and HWBTA 8: Light Ale, Light Lager, Bavarian/Vienna/German-style Black Brew, Dry Stout, Porter or Sweet Stout, Sparkling Barley Wine, Uncommon Brews, and Brown Brew. Now there's a list to make beer for.

Professional brewers distinguish Heavy (OG over 1.050), and Light (OG under 1.050), Pale and Dark (Pale is everything lighter than dark), Top and Bottom fermented, Aged and not Aged, Aged under refrigeration or Aged naturally, and also by alcohol content as required by law. Publicly they label their beer according to traditional categories as we all know. We amateurs use all of the above, plus we differentiate between beers that are made with or without sugar, and between grain beers and extract beers. Now is the time to categorize a little more carefully. It is unfair to match an all-malt all-grain heavy gravity beer which has been cold fermented and aged in a refrigerator for six months against an extract/sugar beer made for quick consumption. Both have their rationale for existence, but in the same judging?

I feel the criteria for classification should follow the above lines rather than the traditional ale, stout and lager nomenclature. If a home brewer is not skilled enough to determine his original gravity, perhaps his or her beer should be judged in a "novice" category.

In our Tasting book we did just that, and I will repeat some of that information here:

CLASS I, PALE or LIGHT colored beers, color straw to amber.

A. Pale Malt Extract Beers.

1. Beer from 40% or less hop flavored malt extract OG 45 or less. This is one tin hop flavored malt extract per average 5-USgallon batch, maximum 10-oz/USgal; 12-oz/UKgal; 70-gm/litre. Extra hops may be added in ferment.
2. Beer from 40% or less plain malt extract with hops or hop extract added by the brewer. OG 45 or less. A 1 and 2 are traditional home brews.
3. Beer from 40% or less plain malt extract OG over 45. Strong home brew.
4. High malt content beer, Maximum dextrose or glucose 11-oz/USgal; 13-oz/UKgal; 76-gm/litre, OR Sucrose 9.5-oz/USgal, 11.3-oz/UKgal; 67-gm/litre. Sugar amount exclusive of that used for carbonation. OG 55 or less
5. High malt content beer OG 55 or more.
6. All-malt beer OG 55 or less. All-Malt beers are brewed only from malt extract from 100% malted barley, hops, yeast and carbonation sugar at bottling with no additives such as ascorbic acid, heading liquid finings or water treatment. Pale Ale or Steam beer.
7. All-malt lager beer OG 55 or less. Refrigerator ferment, aged (lagered) at least 5-months in a refrigerator under 41°F (5°C).

B. Pale beers brewed from 50% or more grain malts. See above for guidelines.

CLASS II, Brown or Dark beers color amber to very dark brown. These can be separated in a manner similar to the above.

CLASS III, Other beers. Those beers which do not fit the above categories.

In actual use one might not want to be quite so technical, but the approach is, I believe, quite proper for organizing our competitions, and will be much more valuable than using the useless beer types which are no longer quite so definitive as they once were. Similar categories may be instituted for high gravity beers, if desired. Names could be assigned.

I hope that this will provide some alternate ideas against what is currently being done.

Happy February y'all

Fred Eckhardt