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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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evidenced in commercial brews, but while that might work in Germany, the uniform blandness of most American pilsners will not yield much information. And if we were to consider pale ales, there are only a few of these sold in the U.S., and these are usually the products of the larger English brewers, like Watneys and Whitbread. Like their American counterparts these big companies tend to be more concerned with making beers that everybody will find unobjectionable, rather than having distinctive character.

What is even worse, as far as concerns trying to define a beer type, is that you will not be much wiser if you actually go to England and sample every one of the pale ales available there. This is because there are probably upwards of 150 different bottled beers styled as light or pale ale (there is no sharp distinction between these two terms) sold in the pubs of Great Britain. Even before we get to considering taste, and just look at original gravities, these lie anywhere between 1.035 and 1.050, with a few strong pale ales at even higher levels. On top of that, the world-famous Burton pale ales of a hundred or so years ago weighed in at starting gravities of 1.060 to 1.090, so we can't even draw on tradition in defining our pale ale!

Apart from gravity, there are substantial differences in colour, body, bitterness levels, and so on; although most pale ales are filtered and pasteurized, a few naturally-conditioned ones remain. A beer brewed only for bottling may have a lot of aromatic hop character, while a pale ale which is simply a bottled version of a draught bitter may not. This is because English brewers often dry-hop their draught beer, i.e. they add a small amount of fresh hops to the beer as it is casked. If part of this brew is bottled as pale ale, it won't get the same treatment, and so will have little aromatic hop flavour.

Actually, I am all in favour of these differences since they help to make beer-drinking a more varied and interesting experience. What I am concerned about, is that the problems of judging a beer in a competition may lead the judges to insist on a greater uniformity in the entries. And that in turn may lead those amateur brewers who haven't won prizes to try to brew their next beers exactly like those of the winners. If we all try to produce beer which tastes the same, then I think our efforts will be entirely wasted, and we might as well stick to Bud and Millers!

What we should be aiming at is producing beers with character. There are certain guide lines to follow; for example, returning to our pale ale, 'pale' means that it is not dark like a brown ale, it should be well-hopped, not too highly carbonated, and it should be made mainly from pale malt plus a little crystal malt, mashed with gypsum-hard water.

However, within these guidelines you can work to produce a beer which suits your taste, not one that you think a judge in a contest will like. The amateur brewer in this country is doing much more than just pursuing an interesting hobby, he is a leader in the revolution against the big brewers' attempts to make all beer uniformly flavourless. To me there is much more merit in producing a beer that is offensive to some palates because it has a strong and unique flavour, than there is in making one to which no one will object because it has no distinctive taste.

I have a couple of final objections to beer competitions. Firstly, to me beer is something to be drunk and enjoyed; if you and your friends like it, it's a good beer, no matter what any judge may say. Secondly, only bottled beers are assessed in competitions, and, in my opinion, these

are second-rate in comparison to draught beers. Don't let me discourage you; if you want to enter brewing contests, then do so. Just don't be too disappointed if your star beer doesn't make the ratings, and keep making it if you think it's good, no matter what anybody else may say!

Terry Foster has written for us before, lives in Milford CT, and has been brewing his English-style beer for 20-years, and he is the author of Dr Foster's Beer Book. His article fits nicely with our own thoughts on beer competition, which are outlined next. I was particularly delighted in his comment about the merits of producing beers offensive to some palates--for years I've been saying just that. If you don't like my beer--GREAT! I'm not insulted (although I may question your taste), I rejoice, because there's more for me! The next little dissertation (diatribe?) will tell you what I think of beer judging.

JUDGING BEER COMPETITIONS

At the last meeting of our beer club, the OREGON BREW CREW, the Steward had us rate the various beers we were tasting by the 30-point California State format. It was a cumbersome and complicated procedure, not at all conducive to rational judgement and comparison. Since then I have done a little more research into the matter, and I have concluded that it is imperative that we arrive at a good (AND ACCEPTABLE) single system for judging beer competitions.

In 1977, I and my associate Jim Takita wrote our booklet Beer Tasting. During our research we found that the evaluation procedure for all foods and beverages was best divided into four departments: Visual examination--we look at what we are tasting and evaluate its appearance. Next we SNIFF (a Brewmaster once told me never to use the word "smell" when you are talking about beer or wine) the product to evaluate its odor. This is followed logically by actually tasting the food or beverage, to evaluate its taste and feel in the mouth. When those steps have been taken we mull it over in our heads and give it a final "after-the-fact" judgement. Most tasting experts agree with this basic system, whether for apple pie, coffee wine or beer.

In our book we made the mistake of making it sound too complicated, and a lot of others have followed to complicate the matter even moreso. We spent two pages telling folks how to "taste" in the mouth, and we described various categories: hop quality, hop intensity, sweet/dry balance, beer or non-hop character, aftertaste, body and palatfulness and flavor balance. We went on and on. You know how I can ramble. Those are all important points, but we're human and we judge the whole much easier than the parts thereof. We've reworked that part of the book, and our advise is judge the appearance, score it, then judge the odor, score it, then taste it and judge that, (the whole taste), and then score for memoriability, add them together, and get on with the next beer. We recommend a 20-point system similar to that used most widely (especially in California) for wine.

If you are interested in these aspects of judging, our book is being offered at 25% off during March, that is 75¢. The real point I am trying to make here concerns the categories, because I agree with Terry Foster in his concern about categories.

CLASSIFYING BEERS FOR COMPETITION

My main bone of contention with HWBTA, California and English

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