

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO OVER 375 CRAFT BEERS

AMERICA'S



BEST

BREWS



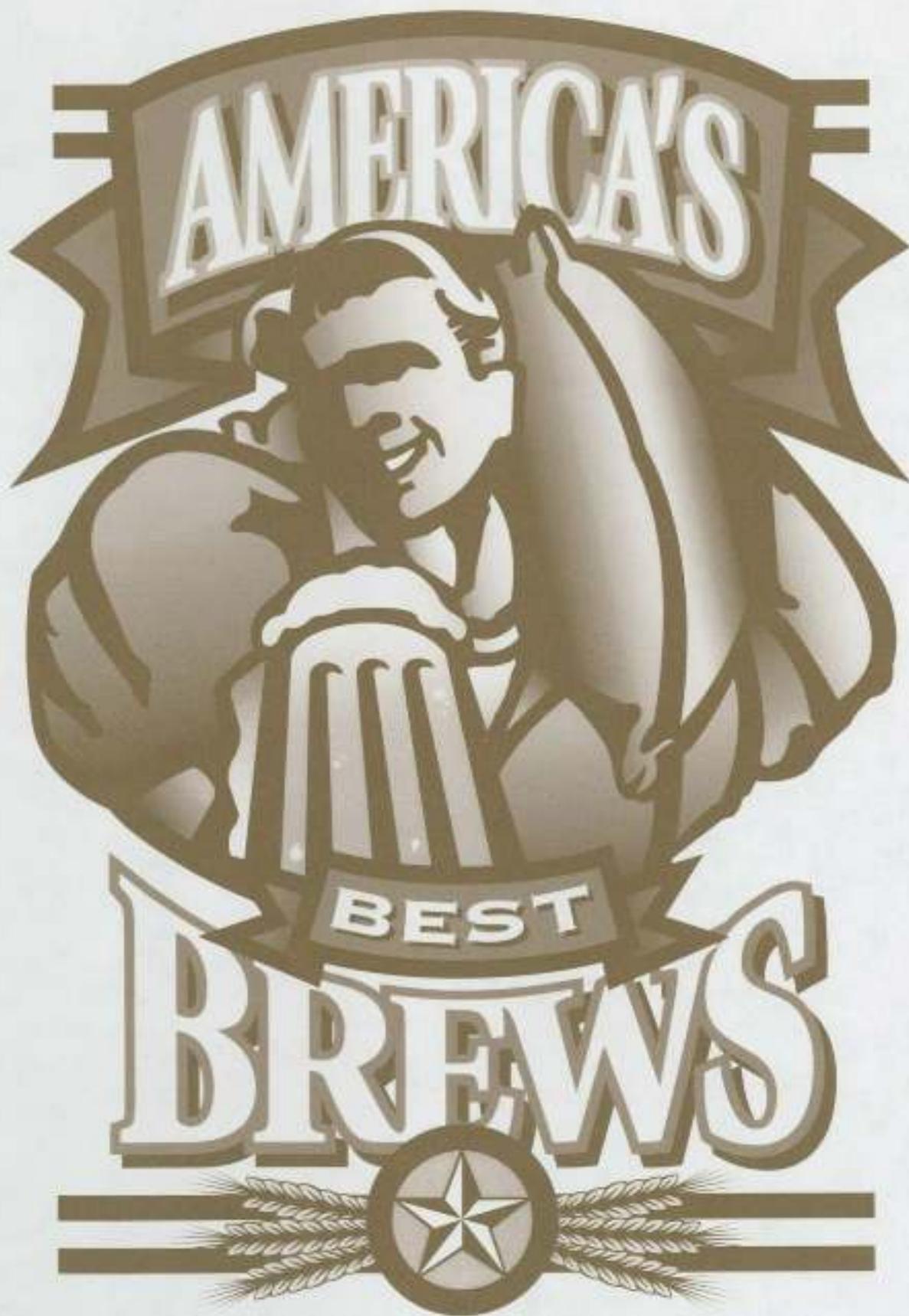
STEVE JOHNSON

INCLUDES A COMPLETE DIRECTORY OF U.S. BREWERIES



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S T E V E J O H N S O N

AMERICA'S BEST BREWS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

When I first became interested in beer in the early 1980s, there were few books on the subject. I familiarized myself with the works of four authors: Michael Jackson, James Robertson, Howard Hillman, and Charlie Papazian. As the beer renaissance progressed, more books, magazines, journals and even “brewspapers” began to appear. There is now an informal college of beer scribes, including Stephen Beaumont from Canada; Roger Protz and Terry Foster from the UK; and Daniel Bradford, Tom Dalldorf, Jim Dorsch, Alan Eames, Fred Eckhardt, Jack Erickson, George Fix, Peter La France, Martin Lodahl, Dave Miller, Randy Mosher, Marty Nachel, Greg Noonan, Bill Owens, Gregg Smith, and Eric Warner from the United States. If you are a beer writer and your name is not on the list, it could be that the beer made me forget.

If it weren't for the sharing of information and ideas by this group of talented and dedicated individuals, my knowledge and appreciation of beer would have been much poorer. Although I have met and enjoyed beer with many of the new authors and publishers, it rarely occurred to me to say a simple “thank you” for their inspiration and enlightenment. So, thank you, and keep up the good work!

INTRODUCTION



Ten years ago I could go to a supermarket and buy Budweiser, Miller, Coors, and a variety of malt liquors and light beers. However, the only beers I considered worth drinking were imports, such as Bass, Grölsch, or Guinness. Now I can find a wonderful sampling of domestic beers: Anchor Steam, Sierra Nevada Pale Ale, Samuel Adams Boston Lager, Pete's Wicked Ale, Rogue Red, and Celis White, just to name a few.

What has happened in the intervening years? Hundreds of breweries have opened, producing thousands of new brands, despite flat overall beer sales. Currently the beer industry is experiencing what I call the *big bang*. As in the theory of cosmology, the universe of modern beer had collapsed and is now exploding in a big bang of flavor. The first big bang came in the mid-nineteenth century with the invention of lager. Lager was flavorful and pure in character; it was a fresh and exciting beer. As it spread and conquered all styles of beers before it, lager gradually became watered down and insipid. Older styles of beer languished, became endangered species and even, in some cases, extinct. With all breweries making the same kind of beer, from the consumers' point of view, it didn't really matter which brewery made it. So, the breweries with more money to spend on marketing pushed aside the smaller ones. More than 4,000 American breweries have closed their doors since the latter part of the nineteenth century. This has caused the disappearance of a culture and a way of life.

Mainline American beer has become so weak in character—essentially a beer without a soul—it can't possibly stave off the current onslaught of the new flavorful and characterful beers. Mainstream beer is made with cheap grains, such as corn and rice, which rob it of its flavor; then pasteurized, which kills the flavor; and finally packaged so that it can sit on the shelf for months on end.

Would you buy a loaf of bread which had sat on the shelf for weeks and weeks? Of course not. Beer and bread are essentially the same thing. They both are made from grain, water, and yeast, both are fermented, and both taste best when consumed fresh. Beer is liquid bread. Bread is solid beer. Large American breweries have succeeded in putting a round peg in a square hole—they took a changeable, unstable, and perishable product and made it into something durable—it had shelf life. What they ended up with was sterile and tasteless beer. To cover its faults, it is served over-carbonated and ice cold.

America is experiencing a beer renaissance. For more than a half century the country endured brewery closings and consolidations, national Prohibition, and a general decline in the variety and quality of beer. In short, beer in America had become boring. Suddenly, everyone is talking about

beer. Breweries are opening in almost every town, more and more brands are showing up on liquor store and supermarket shelves, and beer styles that only our grandparents would remember are appearing across the country. It is as if someone put the beer industry in a bottle and gave it a good shake.

After twenty years of change, it is evident that craft-made beers are a grassroots trend, not a fad. Although consumers can change their buying habits overnight, depending on the latest ad campaigns by mainstream breweries (light beers, ice beers, and dry beers), craft-made beers are different. They are more than just fashionable. There is something about craft beer that is genuine, wholesome, and meaningful. Consumers are changing their outlook on beer gradually. But once they change, they don't go back. They are voting with their feet, and the big brewers have heard the footsteps and are changing their ways gradually, with the launchings of specialty brands, such as Coors Winterfest, Anheuser-Busch's Elk Mountain, and the Miller's Reserve line. Big breweries can deflect the trend, but not stop it.

So, how far is it going? I have studied trends in the world of beer and am happy to say that they last for at least several decades, if not centuries. We still have a long way to go. Craft beers were weird at first, then off-beat, then hip, and now they are becoming mainstream. Craft beers have only captured about 2 percent of the market. What is their potential market share? I would say 50 percent at a minimum. Who can think of a reason why craft beer couldn't capture half of the market? As an example, by 1760 porter had virtually captured the London market. Porter, in those days, was a dark beer with international bittering units (See page 16) of around 60, a level matched or surpassed by only a handful of beers today.

Breweries are opening at the rate of almost one a day. By the end of 1996 there were more than 1,000 breweries in America, and by the year 2000 possibly 2,000 breweries may be open. In predicting the future of beer, "why?" is not the appropriate question to ask. It is time to ask "why not?"

There are certain trends in the new beers that are unmistakable. For one, the new breweries are more product oriented; whereas, the national breweries are more consumer oriented. The new brewer makes beer that *he* or *she* likes. The old brewer makes beer that the marketing department tells him to make. Another trend—the current beer revolution is an ale revolution. Ales are younger than lagers and mature faster. They can be rowdy in character, with many different flavors vying for your attention. Also, the new brewer has rediscovered hops, which is the seasoning added to the malt, and like a child with a new toy, many are hopping the heck out of their beers. I like it. You may not. There are thousands of brands out there, so choose the style that suits you. American brewers are also using hops for flavoring and aroma; whereas, the trend during the twentieth century was to use hops only for bittering. Finally, beer styles are in a state of chaos. The new brewers are using old and new ingredients to make beers that they like. Many of them pay little attention to traditional styles, and some are careless about how they name their beers.

With such a bewildering variety of brands and styles and great variation in quality, how is one to know which beers to choose? That is the purpose of this book, to describe and rate America's best beers. It is intended to serve the consumer, homebrewer, and commercial brewer alike in identifying and enjoying beers that stand out above the rest.

Unusual Beer Names and the Stories Behind Them

Alimony Ale (Buffalo Bill's Brewery)

Bill Owens, the founder of the brewery brewed what he termed the bitterest beer in the world in honor of one of his employees who was going through a divorce.

Big Foot Barleywine (Sierra Nevada Brewing)

Named for the fictitious, hairy monster that roams the mountains of the Pacific Northwest.

Big Nose Blond (McNeill's Brewery)

Owner Ray McNeill gave this humorous name to his blond ale and then tied a Barbie Doll to the tap handle.

Burning River Pale Ale (Great Lakes Brewing)

Named for Cleveland's Cuyahoga River which was once so polluted that it caught on fire.

Caesar's Head Amber Ale (Reedy River Brewing)

Named for a rock formation in the Appalachian Mountains.

Dead Guy Ale (Rogue Ales)

Traditionally released on Halloween, the name refers to the Maya Day of the Dead.

Death-and-Taxes Black Beer (Moonlight Brewing)

Only three things are for certain: Death, taxes, and this beer tastes good.

Doggie Style Amber Ale (Flying Dog Brewpub & Cafe)

Not everyone does it in the missionary position—drink beer, that is.

The Eliot Ness (Great Lakes Brewing)

Named for the famed tigher of mobsters. Ness once had an office in the building where the brewpub is now housed.

Foggy Night in the Orchard (Lyon Brewery)

A name applied by Judy Ashworth, proprietor of a California, pub, to a mixture of a barley wine (Old Foghorn) and a fruit beer (Apricot Ale).

Mogul Ale (Rogue Ales)

Named for a bump in a ski slope.

Mosquito Pilsner (Appleton Brewing)

Named for the Wisconsin “state bird.”

Old Bawdy Barley Wine (Pike Brewing Co.)

When the brewers made their first barley wine, they decided to name it in honor of the brothel that formerly occupied the building where the brewery is located.

Old Fezziwig (Boston Beer Co.)

Named for a character in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*.

Poleeko Gold (Anderson Valley Brewing)

A blond ale named for the Poleekers, residents of the village of Philo, near Boonville, California.

Shakespeare Stout (Rogue Ales)

Rogue Ales was first located in Ashland, Oregon, home of the annual Oregon Shakespeare Festival.

Tupper’s Hop Pocket Ale (Old Dominion Brewing)

Named for the large burlap bags in which dried hop flowers are traditionally shipped.

BEER APPRECIATION

How good is the beer in the glass in front of your? That is a question I asked myself back in 1982 when I had the first glass of beer that I really enjoyed. The beer in front of me was a glass of Bass. Until that moment I hadn’t liked beer because I had only tried American mass-market brands. They were uniformly underflavored, overchilled, and overcarbonated—in one word, uninteresting. I had thought beer was a pretty poor excuse for a beverage. Based on the beer made in America at the time this was a valid Conclusion.

From that day on, I began sampling every kind of beer I could get my hands on, reading books and periodicals about beer, talking to anyone who seemed knowledgeable on the subject—beer enthusiasts, beer writers, beer judges, homebrewers, and commercial brewers—and traveling all across North America in search of good beer, and even as far afield as England and Scotland. I walked through the doorway of my first brewery in 1987. Three hundred breweries and 110,000 miles later I am still going strong. It has become a never-ending quest to discover the world’s best beers. What I have found is that there are many styles of beer; thus, there are many different great beers—Bell’s Expedition Stout, Celebration Ale, Old Crustacean, Cascade Golden Ale, DeGroen’s Doppelbock, Black Razz, Hampshire Special Ale, Liberty Ale, DeGroen’s Pils, Edmund Fitzgerald Porter, Barney Flat’s Oatmeal) Stout, Celis White—and the list continues.

In contrast to the beer wasteland that existed in the United States 20 years ago, America has become the center of attention in the beer world. Many people, like myself, are learning about beer, seeking good beer, and trying to make good beer. There are many excellent beers made in America today, not to mention a diversity of styles and interpretations, which are unmatched by any country in the world.

In the course of my search I found a very simple answer to the original question: How good is the beer in the glass in front of you? The answer: The best beer in the world is the beer you like the most. That is because beer appreciation is completely subjective. Everyone's perceptions, tastes, likes, and dislikes are different.

However, that answer did not satisfy me. Coming from a knowledge and appreciation level of beer that was near zero, I knew that there must be many individuals who would be willing to share their information and refined tastes with me. I found these individuals in all corners of the globe and, in the process, had some wonderful adventures, met all kinds of interesting people, and made many good friends. It has been a most rewarding search in every sense of the word.

FINDING GOOD BEER

With more than 1,000 breweries and 4,000 domestic brands of beer, sorting out the good beers from the bad and mediocre is a daunting task. This book serves as a starting point. The problem with the ratings in this book is the very nature of beer itself—it is evanescent. Forget about a moving target; this is a disappearing target! Beer ripens like a fruit—you don't want to eat it too green nor too ripe. Rating beers is akin to rating rainbows or cloud formations. They appear momentarily, and then they are gone. No two are alike.

Lower-alcohol, delicately-flavored, and low-hopped beers are particularly prone to deterioration and spoilage in the distribution and marketing process. This type of beer neither travels nor stores well and is best sampled at brewpubs. Flavors become disjointed, nicely blended fragrances fall apart, the beer begins to taste stale, and worst of all, it spoils. Good beer flavor is a fleeting thing.

You will notice that brands that are rated highly in this book tend to be "big beers." They are bold flavor, well hopped, and higher in alcohol. This is no mistake. These beers are able to withstand the rigors of overheated warehouses, wholesale personnel who don't rotate their stock properly, retailers who don't understand the difference between beer and wine (or simply don't care), and consumers who don't know how to take care of their beer.

Beer, like bread, is best when fresh (bocks, barley wines, imperial stouts, India Pale Ales, and old ales are exceptions), and it has three deadly enemies: heat, light, and time. For this reason, purchase and consume beer at the brewery whenever possible.

BUYING BEER AT A BREWPUB—RESTAURANT BREWERY

Beer is freshest at the brewery; so, if the brewer is doing a decent job, you are in for a treat. Here are some rules to follow:

1. Visit the establishment during off hours—the best times are just before or after lunch or in the middle of the afternoon. These times will allow you the peace of mind to enjoy your beer.
2. Go straight to the bar, rather than a table. The bartender usually, but not always, knows more about and appreciates the beer more than the table staff. Tell the bartender that it is your first visit there and ask him if he could tell you something about the house beers. Tell him you are on a quest for the perfect beer. This line will usually get him actively involved in your quest. Also,

the brewer frequently hangs out at the bar when not brewing, usually after lunch. If you meet the brewer, take the opportunity to obtain all the knowledge from him that you can. If shown the proper interest, knowledge, and enthusiasm, the brewer may take you on a tour of the brewery and might even give you a private sampling of something extra special.

3. Ask for a sampler. Many places have a beer menu or placemat that will identify and tell you something about the beers. Because of the size and shape of the sampling glass, you probably won't get much head or aroma. To solve this dilemma, on occasion I have asked for an empty wine glass on the side, and a tall glass of water without ice. I pour the first sample in the wine glass, drink it, then fill the wine glass with water and drink the water before the next sample. This is guaranteed to raise a few eyebrows. Some brewpubs do not offer samplers. See if you can get your server to let you sample some anyway; and make sure you let him know how much you appreciate it.
4. If you decide to have a full glass, emphasize to your server that you do not want it in a frozen or chilled glass. I usually ask for a glass that is "room temperature." Using the phrase "ambient temperature" will make the server think you are putting on airs.
5. When sampling wheat beer, ask for a lemon on the side so that you can first sample the beer without the lemon.
6. Ask if they have any cask-conditioned beers. If they do, why waste time? Go for the real thing. Ask if it is served under pressure or on hand pumps. If it is served under pressure, it isn't cask conditioned, regardless of what they call it.
7. If you are one of the first customers of the day, watch out for bad beer. The beer that sits in the lines overnight is really awful stuff. It has an unmistakable rancid/sour taste. Therefore, almost all brewpubs purge their beer lines at the beginning of the day (i.e., they fill up a pitcher of beer and then dump it before the first pour to a customer).

BUYING BEER AT A STORE

If you purchase beer at a store, follow these simple rules:

1. Purchase a brand you know well. Taste it at home to see if it is in good condition. If it is, this is the first sign that the retailer is doing a good job.
2. Check the bottle, labels for dating.
3. Check the bottles for dust. I once found a liquor store in Chicago where the dust was so thick on some bottles I couldn't read the brand names! That might be okay for wine, but not for beer.
4. Check the labels to see if they are faded from sunlight exposure. There is a liquor store in Georgia that puts the most expensive bottles in a sunny window.
5. Check for sediment. Hold the bottle, up to the light, turn it upside down and then right side up. If you see sediment, it could be good or bad. If it stays in suspension after being stirred, it may be protein that has separated, due to the beer being stored at too warm a temperature. Do not purchase this bottle. If the sediment begins to settle, it is probably natural yeast sediment from an unfiltered beer—this beer is probably still good (check the label to see if it states whether it is filtered).
6. Do not purchase beer that has been closer than five or six feet to fluorescent light (fluorescent-lit beer coolers are the worst) or has been in direct sunlight. Ultraviolet rays quickly give beer an off-flavor known as skunky (with a name like that, you needn't ask what it smells or tastes like). This particularly disagreeable odor and flavor is created through the reaction of the ultraviolet rays with hop oils in the beer. Supermarket beers tend to have problems with this. Until recent

years, skunkiness was so common in national brands that customers assumed that beer was ~~SUPPOSED to taste that way!~~

7. Check the neck of the bottle for ring around the collar. If a ring has formed on the inside of the glass at the surface level of the beer, it is a sign of bacterial infection.
8. Examine the bottle for airspace in the neck (this is called ullage). Avoid bottles that have more than an inch or an inch-and-a-half of ullage because they oxidize (go stale) faster.
9. Be wary of seasonal beers that are out of season. Although there are exceptions, most seasonal styles are only produced in season.

Style	Season
bock	spring
maibock	late spring
Oktoberfest	fall
winter warmer	winter
Christmas/holiday	winter
wheat	summer

10. Avoid brands that are bottled in clear or green glass. In general, they do not protect the beer from ultraviolet rays as well as brown bottles.
11. Look for six packs that have tall sides, or completely enclosed boxes. These lessen the beer's exposure to light.
12. Ask the owner/sales staff to point out the new arrivals.
13. Always choose bottles instead of cans, unless you like that subtle metallic taste.
14. Avoid inexpensive beer. Retailers frequently put old beers on special, which by definition, are inferior. Ask yourself this question: Did you come here to save money or buy good beer? It is always better to purchase one bottle of good, expensive beer, than ten bottles of bad beer.
15. Find out through your own observations and through talking to other beer aficionados if the store has a rapid beer stock turnover.
16. Subscribe to store newsletters so that you can find out about new arrivals, tastings, etc.

Screen your local retailers to find out how knowledgeable they are of beer and how they treat it. Just the fact that you asked the retailer about how beer is kept could lead to improved treatment of the beer, or preferential treatment of you as a customer. Find out if they rotate their beer. Check for fluorescent lighting, heat and cold, etc.

Once you have identified the best retailer, get to know the owner/sales staff and stick with them. More often than not, the retailers will not live up to all your expectations; therefore, it is your job to use your positive powers of persuasion to encourage them to improve their beer handling. Let them know that you appreciate good beer, and the good service they provide. If you purchase bad beer, return it and ask for a refund or, at the very least, a replacement.

STORING BEER

As mentioned earlier, the three enemies of beer are heat, light, and time. For this reason, keep your beer in a cool, dark place. For most beers, a refrigerator is ideal. I have my own beer refrigerator with the thermostat set on the warmest possible temperature: 47° F. Cellars are good places for keeping strong, bottle-conditioned ales: 55°-60°F is best. At lower temperatures, the ale yeast becomes dormant. Strong lagers are best in the fridge. With the exception of strong beers, I try to consume all of my beer within two months of purchase. As a rule, old ales, Scotch ales, export stouts, and bocks can be kept for up to a year. Barley wines, doppelbocks, and imperial stouts should keep for two or more years.

Store the beer upright, in order to lessen the surface area exposed to the air in the bottle. Also, avoid agitating your beer. Agitation exposes more of it to the oxygen in the neck, hastening oxidation.

SERVING BEER

Beer served in restaurants and homes in America is usually between 35°–40°F. These tongue-numbing temperatures are too cold to appreciate the beer's full flavor and aroma because aroma agents in the beer tend to volatilize at warmer temperatures. In addition, the colder temperatures hold more of the carbon dioxide in the beer, making the drinker more prone to burp. The right serving temperature varies with the style of beer. The rule is that natural flavors and aromas are most readily apparent at or near the natural fermentation temperature of the beer. Here is a rough temperature guideline for serving:

pale lagers	45°F– 50°F
pale ales & dark lagers	50°F– 55°F
dark ales	55°F– 60°F

If you are in a restaurant, let the beer warm up as much as possible. Cupping your hands around the glass will hasten the warming. If at home, take the beer out of the fridge a half hour to an hour, before serving it. Remember, large bottles take longer to warm.

Always pour the beer into a clean, clear, uncolored glass container. Don't drink out of the bottle, unless you are participating in a belching contest. Never use a beer glass for anything except beer and water. This will help avoid off flavors. Pouring the beer into a glass releases some of the carbon dioxide. A clear glass container allows you to see the beer and appreciate its color, clarity, head, and effervescence. Grease and oil on glassware inhibit the buildup of a good head. Dirt causes hundreds of large bubbles to form on the inside of the glass, detracting from the appearance of the beer. When cleaning beer glasses follow these rules:

1. Do not use soap; it leaves a film on the glass. Detergent is okay; baking soda is better.

2. Never wash a beer glass with other dishes, even in the dishwasher.
3. ~~Do not use a sponge or dishcloth to wash the glass. Use a clean bottle brush instead.~~
4. Thoroughly rinse the glass with hot water and let it air dry. A dish towel could leave film on the glass.

A beer glass is more than just a container for the liquid; it is also a container for aroma. For this reason, the shape of the glass is important. A tulip-shaped glass, like a goblet or brandy snifter, is the best for capturing the aroma. When pouring, leave a couple of inches of aroma space at the top.

There are different types of glassware for different styles of beer. A Pilsner glass is tall and slender emphasizing the visual effect of the beer's light color and active carbonation, and promoting the creation of a frothy head. Pale lagers, which should be served relatively cold, are frequently served in heavy glassware with thick sides to help keep the lager cold. These glasses usually have handles to prevent the beer drinker's hand from warming the glass. Broad-mouthed glasses are best for ales, allowing space for the delicate esters created by the ale yeast. Wheat beer glasses are both broad and extremely tall, allowing room for the gigantic head. I prefer the wheat beer glass for all styles of beer. It allows for maximum agitation when pouring the beer, plus plenty of head and aroma space. At the end of the pour I usually have about 20 percent beer and 80 percent head.

There is no correct way to pour beer. It all depends on the desired result. I want maximum aroma and flavor and little carbonation. For this reason, I pour beer from about two inches over the top of the glass, directly into bottom of the glass. This maximizes agitation, increases the release of aromas, decreases the amount of carbonation, and warms the beer faster. Waiting for that towering head to subside allows the beer more time to warm. If you are so eager to drink your beer right away that you can't wait for the head to subside, tilt the glass and gently pour the beer down the side. If you are a bartender, you will use this method to save time and avoid giving the customer the impression he is being cheated out of some beer due to the large head.

If you have an unfiltered, bottle-conditioned beer, you might want to decant it by gently pouring it down the side of the glass, or into an intermediate container first, such as a pitcher. I used to do this until I realized that I enjoyed the taste of yeast, despite the grimaces of those around me. You will get a lot more vitamins and minerals that way.

The light source in the room should always be incandescent or natural sunlight. Fluorescent light tends to give pale beers a greenish color.

EVALUATING BEER

Beer evaluation is performed for a variety of reasons. People do it alone or in groups for their own personal enjoyment and education. Beer judges do it to pick winners at contests. Homebrew judges do it for the added reasons of detecting deficiencies and providing feedback to homebrewers. At the opposite end of the pole are professionals who evaluate beer to provide quality control in breweries.

Judging and quality control must meet rigorous standards that take much, if not all of the enjoyment out of the process. Quality control must be conducted under stricter standards than judging. The taster must not see the beer's label, or even communicate with other tasters. Commercial and homebrew contests are conducted in a way in which the judges are looking for shortcomings rather than positive attributes. Beer styles are targets at which the brewers aim.

A brewer loses points if he doesn't brew according to style. A brand could receive a perfect score if it had no defects and matches the style perfectly. According to this method, a perfectly made American

ice beer could receive a gold medal, just the same as a perfectly made stout. These are things that are definable, quantifiable, and therefore, defendable.

In contrast, I would ask myself the following questions, “How much did I enjoy that beer? Would I purchase it again? would I go out of my way to buy it? How memorable was it? Did it make an impression on me?” As we shall see later, I score beers on a scale of one to twenty. However, I do not hold myself strictly to the scores. I am interested in styles and use them to classify different brands. I take styles into account when judging a beer. However, the bottom line is always “How much did I enjoy it?” This is known as the hedonic method and relates to pleasure. Some beer styles, such as American ice beer or American lager are insipid. I would have to be coerced or threatened before I would award a gold medal to one of these beers. I’m not saying my approach is right and others are wrong. I understand why they are the way they are. Our orientation is just different.. I am concerned only with education and enjoyment.

Other than altering your attitude, beer elicits pleasures to four of your senses: sight, smell, taste, and touch. A memorable beer should be beautiful to look at, have an appetizing aroma, and a delicious taste. In this respect it is similar to wine, so it is logical that beer evaluation follows the general lines developed by wine tasters. The biggest difference is swallowing. Wine tasters typically spit out the samples after tasting them. The average beer is only about one-third the strength of the average wine. You can drink a lot more beer before the alcohol will affect your judgment and reactions. So, go ahead, swallow.

AROMA

After the beer is poured, put your nose over the top of the glass, or in it, if possible, and sniff. It is important to do this as soon as possible after the beer is poured because some aromas are very volatile and vanish quickly. The aroma’s importance should not be underestimated because when tasting food and beverages, aroma is largely responsible for what we perceive as taste. This is an important moment because your sense of smell tends to fade within a few seconds of experiencing a new smell. Close your eyes so that you can concentrate fully on the aroma.

APPEARANCE

After a quick evaluation of the aroma, it’s time to open your eyes and take a good look at the beer because the head is already beginning to recede (more on aroma later). Hold the glass up to the light and examine the head and body. A dense, fine, and long-lasting head is the sign of quality ingredients and brewing skill. Wheat beers and barley wines are exceptions—wheat beers naturally tend to have loose heads, and barley wines tend to have very little, if any, head at all. The lace left on the side of the glass after the head recedes can be beautiful. The intricate patterns are known as “Brussels lace.” As you drink, concentric rings, which are left on the side of the glass are pleasant, too. Particularly dense, creamy heads, such as the head on a draft Guinness, is due to a combination of carbon dioxide and nitrogen gas used to dispense the beer. Many American brewpubs have picked up on this technique.

Examine the liquid for color, clarity, and carbonation. In judging color, remember that the size of the glass has a lot to do with the depth of color—the larger the volume, the darker the color. I once had a disagreement with someone about the color of a beer, only to discover that we were both right—we were looking at the same beer in different sized glasses. Some stouts and doppelbocks are so opaque that it helps to hold a flashlight up to them to see the true color (they frequently have a reddish

hue). I use the following terms to describe beer color, going from lightest to darkest:



Clarity is described in four levels: bright (or brilliant), clear, hazy, and cloudy. Early on I was taught that all beer styles except wheat beers should be bright. I have had to unlearn that advice because any style can be clear or hazy, depending on whether it is filtered. Ales, with the exception of cream ale, Kölsch, and wheat beer should have a relatively low level of carbonation. Lagers, especially light lagers, should have active carbonation. At one end of the carbonation scale are barley wines, which are relatively still. At the other end are wheat beers, which should be highly carbonated. Look at the entire beer and decide if it is pleasing.

AROMA, PART 2

Now, let's return to the aroma. Sniff the beer again. Swirl the beer in the glass to encourage the release of more aroma. The aroma should entice you to taste the beer. If the beer is not properly made or past its prime, it usually begins to show up at this point. The various components are covered in the chapter on Beer Flavor Components. Flavor and aroma for the most part go together. However, there are differences. Ales frequently have estery aromas created by the yeast. These are usually defined as fruity, but when less distinct, I just call them "estery." In addition, beers that are dry hopped and/or hopped at the end of the boil tend to have a floral, herbal aroma. The different aroma elements, esters, malts, hops, and maybe even spices should create a fragrant bouquet. This bouquet is more important to certain styles, such as Pilsners, than others.

PALATE

Finally! It's time to taste the beer! Flavor is perceived through your taste buds, which are located on the tongue. The four primary types of taste buds are sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. The sweet receptors are primarily at the tip of the tongue, salty near the front, sour toward the back, and bitter at the back. The flavor of a beer is divided into foretaste, midtaste, and aftertaste. Foretaste is the initial flavor and sensation as the beer first enters your mouth; midtaste consists of the flavors perceived while you swirl the beer in your mouth; and aftertaste is the flavor left in your mouth after you swallow. Contrary to what some beer marketers have tried to lead the public to believe, beer is supposed to have an aftertaste! Combining the location of the various taste buds with the action of drinking creates a definite order of flavors, beginning with sweet and ending with bitter.

A word on bitterness. Beer is supposed to be bitter. If we could take the bitterness out of coffee, it wouldn't be coffee anymore. The same holds true for beer. Occasionally at beer tastings someone who really doesn't like beer will slip in. With a grimace on their face, they will complain, "But it's sooooo bitter!" My response is, "If you don't like bitter, then you have no business drinking beer." The American palate had become so bland by the mid-twentieth century that we really should have just stopped making beer altogether. Several brewpubs have the motto: "If you can't taste it, why make it." Taking the bitterness out of beer, not to mention removing flavor in general, was the downfall of American beer, and the cause of the current revolution.

Bitterness in beer is measured in International Bittering Units (IBUs). This measures the concentration of alpha acids in the finished beer. Alpha acids are the bittering agents present in hops that are extracted from the hops during the boiling process. The human taste threshold for bitterness is around 10-12 IBUs. Major beer brands, such as Budweiser, Miller, and Coors hover around 12-15 IBUs. These beers used to be much more bitter than they are now. Perceived bitterness, however, is different. The amounts of sweet maltiness and viscosity of the beer changes the perception of bitterness significantly. Also, the more hops the brewer puts in the beer, the less efficient is the extraction process. That was more than a word about bitterness—back to the tasting.

Take no more than an ounce of beer in your mouth, hold it briefly, slowly swirl it, hold it again, suck in a small amount of air through your mouth (this releases volatile aromas), and then swallow it. Do this several times with your eyes closed while thinking about the flavor components. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What are the different elements?
- How strong are they?

- What is the sequence of flavors?
- ~~Do they blend well?~~
- Overall, is it sweet or dry?
- Is the sample fresh?
- Does the flavor linger very long?
- Are there noticeable off flavors?
- Is the flavor profile very close to the style intended?

The ability to identify and articulate the different flavors present in beer does not come naturally. It takes study and practice (aaah, but it's a fun hobby). For this reason, when tasting beer I always seek out others who are skilled at this art. People have different thresholds for various flavor components. For example, diacetyl (buttery or butterscotch) is not one of my fortes, so I like to have someone present who can recognize the flavor. On the other hand, a sulfury off-flavor is something I can pick out in a heartbeat.

Last but not least, your sense of touch comes into play. During all of this tasting you've been feeling the beer with your lips, the sides of your mouth, tongue, and throat. Mouthfeel, texture, or body is important to the total beer experience. Body ranges from thin to thick. It comes from the sugars, carbohydrates, and protein content of the beer and its level of carbonation. A particularly full bodied beer is frequently referred to as "chewy."

To me, every beer plays a song in my mouth. Instead of a sequence of notes, beer is made up of a sequence of flavors. Some styles, such as an India Pale Ale, are sharp and loud. Others are very subtle such as a helles, Vienna, Kölsch, or brown ale. A very simple beer is played in single notes; a well-made beer is played in chords. Some beers start out well, peter out, and then pick up again. Others just fade away into nothingness. My favorite beers are like symphonies. These beers are complex, long lasting, and made with many varieties of malts and hops, which are masterfully blended by the brewer.

To evaluate and remember the beers I have tried, I use a rating sheet to record my impressions and to score the beer. It includes the following:

Beer Evaluation Sheet

Brand name _____			Name _____		
Brewery _____			date _____		
Style _____					
freshness	dating	ABW	ABV	Container:	Location:
IBU	O.G.			bottle	brewery
malt	hops			keg	bar
				cask	home
Appearance					
Body:	clarity	color		bubbles	
Head:	height	color		retention	lace
		low	medium	high	
					Description
Aroma					Foretaste
Intensity					
					Midtaste
Description					
Palate					Aftertaste
Sweet—Dry					
Bitter					
Malt					
Hops					
Intensity					
Freshness					
Alcohol					
Length					
					Balance
					Texture/body
					SCORE
					Appearance
					1-3
					Aroma
					1-4
					Palate
					1-9
					Overall
					1-4
					TOTAL

Space is provided for a description of the aroma, palate, and body. The palate is divided into foretaste, midtaste, and aftertaste. There is a scale on the left to indicate the intensity of the aroma. There is another scale to record the degree of bitterness, maltiness, hoppiness, overall intensity, freshness, alcohol, length, and sweetness versus dryness. Space is provided on the right to record scores, based on a twenty-point scale.

The scale was modified from one appearing in Charlie Papazian's *The Complete Joy of Homebrewing*. Various other scales in the literature are described as 20-, 50-, and 100-point scales. However, by allowing the assignment of zero points, these are really 21-, 51-, and 101-point scales. I frequently assign half points in categories.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

As mentioned many times before, tasting and evaluating beer is very subjective. For this reason you should try to keep interferences and distractions to a minimum—just as long as you don't take the fun out of it altogether.

Your sense of smell and taste are most perceptive when you are hungry. For this reason, conduct a tasting just before lunch or dinner. Two to three ounces of each beer is plenty for evaluation purposes.

Do not use cosmetics, colognes, or perfumes. They make it very difficult to taste or smell beer. The same goes for smoking. Food is to be avoided, especially spicy, greasy or salty food. Even the

consumption of bread or unsalted crackers to cleanse the palate is questionable. Water is the best way to cleanse the palate between samples. Bottled water is preferred. If from a municipal water source, water should be treated with an activated-charcoal filter to eliminate chlorine odors. Toothpaste coats the tongue deadening your sense of taste; so, don't brush your teeth less than two-to-three hours before a tasting. Finally, the tasting room should be quiet so tasters can concentrate on their work.

BLIND TASTING

Despite the fact that it is more complicated, it is best to do a tasting without knowing the identity of the beers. This is called a blind tasting. The identity of the beer can have a serious psychological impact on the taster. By "blind tasting," I don't mean putting on a blindfold. I mean having the beer poured into a glass by someone in another room, so that you don't know the identity of the brands.

To eliminate slanted judgements, there should be no talking among participants in professional competitions. However, if education is the primary goal of the tasting, talking among participants is beneficial. It is helpful if one person acts as moderator to solicit information from each participant and to minimize the chances of one person dominating the discussion.

SELECTION OF BEERS

Ideally, all beers should be the same style. Only in this way can you effectively rate and evaluate the beers. Mixing styles is like rating apples and oranges, and the rating becomes a rating of styles, not brands. Five to seven brands is a good number to rate. More brands make it confusing. If the person arranging the tasting is familiar with the brands, he should arrange the beers in order of intensity, with the most delicate beers first and the biggest-tasting ones last. This is because a more subtle beer will be completely overpowered if preceded by a more intense beer.

Beers are usually tasted sequentially. However, for comparison purposes, it is very educational to bring out two or three brands at a time so that they can be cross tasted. This method can't be beat for comparing brands.

SELECTION OF EVALUATORS

Forming a small circle of beer aficionados is an effective way to learn together and share information and impressions. After a few tastings together you will learn each others' strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes. A dedicated group can learn and develop tasting skills much faster than someone learning alone.

HOSTING A BEER-TASTING PARTY

Beer-tasting parties have become very popular with the increased interest in beer and the proliferation of breweries and brands. They provide a good opportunity to introduce neophytes to the pleasures of beer. Unlike rating or judging, having a good time and social interaction are two of the most important aspects. In many respects these two things compromise the evaluative aspects of the tasting; so, many of the points previously discussed can be thrown out the window.

If you are hosting such an event, here are some helpful tips:

1. Select the beers according to the audience. You will usually have a broad spectrum of participants, from Bud drinkers to die-hard Big Foot fans. A broad range of brands and styles is

popular because there is something for everyone. I usually make the mistake of overestimating the audience and have too many big beers on hand. Many people talk big beer, and will even bring a brand to impress others, but prefer something fairly bland. However, don't go too far in the other direction and provide only mass-market beers. Definitely have some transition beers. Bring something bizarre, like smoked beer or a German weizenbier.

2. Try a geographic theme—beers of Germany, California, New England, etc.
3. Provide five to seven brands. About four ounces per brand per person works pretty well. This gives a maximum of 28 ounces per person, or a little more than two bottles.
4. If possible, use glassware rather than plastic.
5. Include food as part of the tasting. Provide snacks. A dinner-beer party works well, and potluck even more fun.
6. Make a short presentation about beer tasting, the proper way to evaluate a beer, the fact that everyone's palate is different. A lot of people want to know the "rules," such as the correct way to pour, right glassware, etc. Novices will usually be turned off by unfiltered beer, bitter beer, warm beer, and dark beer; so, address these topics. Emphasize the importance of quality over quantity. Make your presentation as short as possible and get on with the tasting before you lose your audience, who will be chomping at the bit (I can't emphasize this enough). I frequently pass out the first beer before starting my little spiel.
7. Provide a handout about the beers being tasted. Some participants will want to make notes on it and take it home with them. If convenient, provide handouts from the breweries.
8. Avoid voting by participants unless the beers are the same style.
9. Taste the beers in order from lightest to darkest or from most subtle to most intense.
10. If dinner is involved, have beer to accompany it, and provide an after dinner beer, such as fruit lambic, old ale, barley wine, imperial stout, etc.
11. Watch out for participants with hidden agendas who can ruin it for the rest. These people are usually the types who want to get drunk. On rare occasions I have also run into beer snobs who want to impress people with their knowledge. If you know of a beer snob in advance, let him help you organize the tasting and then recognize him in your talk as someone who is knowledgeable and can answer questions for people. This will steer him into a constructive frame of mind.

FLAVOR COMPONENTS OF BEER

MAJOR COMPONENTS

Malty—Malt tastes like cereal, like cooked grain. It's that delicious aroma you smell at a brewery when the brewer is mashing. If you like that smell, you will love beer. The degree to which malt is roasted has a very definite effect on its flavor. Pale malts impart the basic, sweet, cereal-like flavor. Medium roasted malts, such as caramel (crystal), cara-pils, Munich, or Vienna, can impart a roasted, caramel, spicy, or nutty flavor. Well-roasted malts, such as chocolate, and black malt, can impart well-roasted, coffeeish, chocolate, molasses-like, rich, and burnt flavors.

Bitter—Bitterness is usually derived from the hops. It can also come from highly roasted or burnt barley (either malted or unmalted). Because bitterness is perceived toward the back of the tongue, it comes on stronger near the finish.

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