

AHA NHC 2007 Status Report

by Gordon Strong
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This status report was excerpted from an email sent by Gordon Strong to the BJCP Board after the AHA National Homebrewers Conference. It includes all the various meetings and discussions held on BJCP-related business throughout the conference. As an email, it was written in a conversational tone and refers to BJCP staff by first name.

1. Committee Updates

Prior to the conference, I met Dick Dunn who is the lead expert on the cider exam subcommittee. The group is generating questions and discussing the topics important to cider judges. Dick and I discussed the exam, what cider judges should know, how cider is judged, and sampled some of his ciders.

During a lunch break at the conference, I met with several members of the mead exam subcommittee. We evaluated a number of varietal meads prepared by Michael Fairbrother. Susan took notes on the characteristics. Julia Herz provided a number of references to the group that were developed by the International Mead Association (our co-sponsor of the exam). We also got a plug from David Myers of Redstone during his talk. The mead subcommittee is currently reviewing the question pool.

Before the AHA GC meeting, I spent some time with Jamil discussing the color guide committee work. A sample had been produced. I also received samples of a different guide prepared by a member in Indiana. We compared these with the original Davison guide. A.J. deLange is testing the samples to see which might be most accurate. Several BJCP members at the meeting also gave us their opinions on the guides.

After the judging, I met with the Exam Committee. We talked about various options for proceeding, and near-term actions. The team that was present seemed committed to continuing.

2. Directorate Updates

After the Exam Committee meeting, I spent time talking with Steve P about the exam program. We discussed staffing, the turnaround time of the grading process, grader development and feedback, how to monitor the program, automation support desired, and general program improvements.

I talked to Jamil a few times about the IT program. We discussed staff additions, development priorities, tools, and issues with our server environment. Jamil and I spoke with Chris Graham of MoreBeer a couple times about the general environment. We're going to try to get to a dedicated server where we can make more changes. We've been delayed in implementing some services because we need different versions of software than MoreBeer uses. Jamil provided me with a copy of a new development tool we'll be using. We also talked about some of the applications we're developing, and how we want to move ahead with database migration.

I talked to Kris a couple times about the CEP program. He decided to streamline the treatment of CEP points at the NHC to make it less cumbersome to track; seemed like a good idea to me. Everyone attending the full conference will get 2 CEP points without having to do sign-in sheets. We'll get the data from the AHA directly (update: this data has been received and entered into the database). We also talked about the current status of the vocabulary application, which is nearing launch. We talked about how to handle the tasting kits, and some ideas for creating training classes.

3. Other Discussions

I attended the AHA GC meeting. While those discussions are private, I did emphasize the need to continue improving the judge experience at the conference and improving the overall national competition. Some changes made this year to improve the judge experience were to schedule the judging for one day, to repeat any talks held during judging, to add a hands-on pre-conference judge reception, and to use the streamlined scoresheet to speed up judging. The areas where the AHA and BJCP cooperate are all running smoothly, and we continue to enjoy a very good relationship with the AHA.

A VP at the Siebel Institute (Keith Lemcke) approached me about having a joint event for judges in conjunction with Siebel's Master of Beer Styles & Evaluation program. They offered a Friday event at Goose Island (Clyborn) in Chicago, suggesting an exam be given in the morning with a hands-on training event in the afternoon. It had some of the same ideas as the popular Judge Reception at the NHC, so I told him we were interested and asked him to offer some suggestions. It might be something that could be done in November. They want to work with us and look for better ways to cooperate. I'm very encouraged by that, and will follow-up. Maybe this could be a model for BJCP regional training events.

Ray Daniels talked to me about developing a beer sommelier program. I asked him about his concept, and it seems to be focused on restaurants, beer stores, and other retail establishments. I discussed our ideas about developing an exam or program for stewards and/or competition helpers. There didn't seem to be much overlap in concept. So I thought if he wanted to develop a program that it wouldn't likely be something we would object to. I told him our concerns were to not create anything that duplicated BJCP functions (style guides, written/tasting exams, etc.). I said we'd likely be interested in collaborating on the areas where we had joint interest, such as using the BJCP tasting exam, style guidelines, and study materials as the basis for evaluating beer knowledge. One idea Ray had was to establish a sommelier program that had a tasting requirement for some levels, and allow certain scores on the BJCP exam to satisfy the requirement. I thought that would work fine; it doesn't take any changes on our part. It sounded like his concept was built around the wine sommelier program, and doesn't compete with us. I said we'd be happy to work with him since it benefits the overall beer enthusiast community, which we both serve.

4. Pre-Judging Event

The AHA scheduled a pre-conference Judge Reception at Wynkoop. It cost \$20, and included a buffet dinner and a beer, plus technical talks on the new checklist scoresheet (given by me) and a Siebel flavor training talk (given by Randy Mosher). It was extremely well-attended (over 100 people were there).

I talked about how to use the new scoresheet, and then we judged two Wynkoop beers (IPA, Tripel) with it. The first one we judged together, and the second one we judged separately then discussed. There were a number of good questions about the mechanics of using the sheet. People seemed to understand and get used to it. Randy's talk was interesting and also had a practical component.

I did get positive feedback from several of the people there about the reception. The only negatives that I heard about the event was that it was held offsite so people had to commute, that it overlapped some of the other pre-conference events (beer trips), and that it had a \$20 cover charge for the room and meal. The \$20 was a last minute addition since it was needed to get a room that size.

I followed-up with the AHA afterwards looking for ways to improve the event in the future. We all agreed that it seemed to be a great idea and should be continued. It should be integrated with the general conference planning, so the local site committee would handle the logistics not the AHA staff.

The BJCP could look at sponsoring the event by subsidizing or offsetting some of the costs since the event is essentially a BJCP-only judge training session. However, if a room can be obtained without having to guarantee meal/drink revenue then that's the preference. If it can be held at the conference hotel or someplace nearby, that would probably be better. I said that we'd be happy to coordinate speakers/topics and help with the planning of the event. We want this to be a hands-on training function, which is something that usually doesn't happen during the conference itself. Certainly there is a desire to have a successful judge function as part of the conference, and we want to be part of it.

I also had discussions with people organizing next year's competition in Cincinnati about the ways to incorporate some of these lessons learned. They've got a lot of ideas too, so it should be a good foundation for making improvements.

5. Judging

The turnout of judges was phenomenal. They had enough judges to have three judges for each sub-flight (three per category). Each sub-flight was headed by at least a National judge, and each category was headed by at least a Master judge. They had adequate stewards and staff. The only complaints were the room was somewhat cramped, and the beer tended to be served too warm (a problem with how the refrigerated truck was set).

Judging seemed to proceed smoothly, and completed on time. Flights using the checklist scoresheet seemed to work well. The longest flights were the mead flights not using the checklist sheet. The AHA is currently surveying judges and entrants on the checklist scoresheet, and will provide feedback. I only had anecdotal feedback, but many people told me it worked well once they understood the concept and used it a few times.

A judge/staff-only raffle was held after the event, and seemed to be quite popular.

Best-of-show judging was held the next morning. It started promptly at 9am, and was done before 10am. Very smooth.

6. Other Ad Hoc Work

I picked up the old exams from Jamil and entered the data into the database myself. I had a full car, so I was incentivized to get it done. I found some interesting things in the files; I've passed along some historical items to Ed for archival on the web site (old exams, scoresheets, etc.). I think some of this material has been subsequently posted.

I got a call from Russ about the pin order. We had hoped to have samples at the conference, but there was a problem with the first run so the maker had to redo the mold. Subsequently, Russ got in touch with me after the next run had been done. They look very good, but there are a couple minor finish issues we needed to resolve. The manufacturer subsequently did two additional runs. I recently sent out a separate message on the pin status.

I spent some time talking to Stan Hieronymus about changes to the style guideline to reflect his work and those of other Belgian beer books published after the last update. Stan had previously given me a bunch of changes, and I had made them. I gave him a copy of the marked up guidelines for review, and he subsequently agreed with all the proposed changes.

7. BJCP Member's Meeting

The BJCP meeting was very well attended; it looked like a nearly full room to me. We didn't use slides this year; it was an open discussion with reports from all directorates and committees, with Q&A as we went along. Excellent staff turnout; all parts of the organization were represented. The general theme was to give a status update on what we're working on, with plans for the coming year. People were referred to the Annual Report on our web site for detailed status as of the start of the year.

I started by talking about some of the ongoing projects that might be visible to members: a color guide, new pins, and nametags. I showed examples of color guides under consideration and the original nametag Ed had produced. I gave a status of these efforts, and talked about what we hope to do next. I talked about providing the nametags free when a person validates their email and contact information, getting the new pins validated and ordered so we always have stock on hand, and issues related to getting the color guide produced. This was a general theme on increasing member services, with more to be done in the future.

I briefly mentioned a few scoresheet-related ad hoc projects, including developing the checklist scoresheet and related materials for the conference. I also described the PDF-based scoresheet.

We discussed the Judge Reception and the judge experience at the conference. There was general positive feedback about both, and very positive reception to the idea of the BJCP subsidizing the reception and providing more hands-on training. More details about the conference and judging will be determined by the AHA as part of their survey process.

We talked about other changes to the conference to make it more appealing to judges, such as having the judging done in one day, repeating any technical sessions held during judging, using the checklist scoresheet to speed up the process, and adding a judge reception and training event. These things are likely to be repeated in the future, as the AHA sees them working well. We'll use feedback from post-conference surveys and other discussions to guide our actions.

I mentioned the open committees, including exam, legal, color guide, rules and mead/cider. I mentioned that both the mead and cider subcommittees had been recently active and were

generating and reviewing questions for the exams. Several people subsequently volunteered to help test any exam.

Jamil talked about the color guide committee, and the nametag project. He said color guide prototypes had been produced but we weren't fully happy with them. He asked if anyone knew of printers who might be able to help us to contact him. He said we had other alternatives to evaluate, and were continuing to work on it. The nametag project gave Jamil a chance to mention that he had recruited an IT developer as a helper on projects, Matthew Shoup. He was working on the nametag application and helping Jamil update the web applications to have more of a "portal" feel to them. He discussed other IT projects being worked, including adding the ability to send bulk mail to people. He and I talked about longer range plans including transitioning our Filemaker database, adding newer web applications and generally improving our web services. He gave a well-deserved shout out to Beer, Beer & MoreBeer for providing our web hosting for free.

Kris gave a very detailed review of CEP events, and introduced his assistant directors. He talked about changes in awarding CEP credit for the event to reduce the paperwork and staff workload. He talked about the FlavorActiv kits being tested and ready, and being prepared to launch. He discussed exam prep and special event examples on the web site, and requested additional user-submitted content. He described an active project to identify commercial beer examples of particular flavor components, hop varieties, malt flavors, etc. He also described a project to develop a honey varietal descriptor database.

Kris, Kevin and Ted talked about the vocabulary application. Thanks were given to all who are working on the project, especially the pronunciations by Beth Z. (Someone said he wanted to keep clicking on her saying "spicy, spicy, spicy") The vocabulary app has a lot of content, and people are continuing to add new definitions and descriptors. The web link was given (it's in the CEP Newsletter). People seemed quite interested in this project.

Dave H talked about the competition program. He said the AHA/BJCP SCP merging was very successful, and that we are working well with the AHA. He talked about his success in getting organizer reports submitted (withholding registration for unreported competitions works). He said we were as busy as we've ever been and things seem to be running well, including getting competitions running in several other countries.

I described the current project to revise the BJCP style guidelines with changes suggested by members since the last release, an updated list of commercial examples, revised style parameters for certain styles (especially some of the Belgian styles), and general clean-up. Jamil calculated and confirmed all the gravity and alcohol parameters. Kris validated each listed commercial example. I described it as a minor release without adding any new styles, changing any category numbers or making any huge changes. There were several additional books written on beer styles since the last guidelines were released, so revising the descriptions and specifications to agree with the new research was a priority. Saisons are more attenuated, for instance.

I also described our desire to have descriptions of other styles written up and posted on our web site as proto styles that could be used in competitions. I asked Rick Garvin, who has been promoting kellerbier as a style, to write up the first example of a minor style that could possibly be used in this way. If we have a repository of such styles, brewers could print out the description and submit it to competitions as a description for judges. If they are used enough,

those styles might be promoted into the full style guidelines. It's also a way for members to help out with research projects and write up their favorite underappreciated styles.

Steve P talked about the exam program, and general changes made by the exam committee. Changes in T/F questions, changing question formats, updating the study guide, etc. Busy time for exam program; lots of people taking the exam. We need more graders, anybody volunteering? Some people in the audience were graders carrying around exams to be graded. Others were new graders. Most of the changes Steve mentioned are documented on our web site.

I talked about our membership growth in general, and our international outreach effort. It was a nice chance to recognize a judge from Australia who was in attendance. He got up and spoke about his group and got a big round of applause. I briefly discussed a desire to get more input from international members and to make sure our various program materials and services were properly supporting them. For instance, we might want to have some important styles documented for those regions (like sparkling ale for Australia). We also might want to document how to get a local group going in a new country. I talked about trying to reach out to homebrewers and potential judges in other countries that might want to start up BJCP "chapters." I think it's a good indication of our popularity that we're getting interest from other countries.

Ed spoke about communication programs. He asked a question to the group about how many people had visited the BJCP web site in the last month, and was surprised to see almost the entire audience raise their hand. He also talked about trying to add new content to the web site and gave some examples. He asked for more participation. He mentioned adding some additional staff in the future.

This also gave me an opportunity to mention the BJCP Forum, and talk about how we added additional content after last year's meeting. In particular, we added the Advanced Judging Q&A based on actual questions from sessions in Orlando. I asked people to take a look and feel free to ask additional questions they'd like to see addressed.

I talked about some of the side discussions I had with Siebel and Ray Daniels, and said that they were indicative of the health of the BJCP (people want to partner with us) and our willingness to partner with other groups to benefit our members.

I gave an update on our legal effort after asking any non-BJCP people to step out of the room. Nothing new to us, just a general review of the status and what we expect to happen next. There were a few questions from newer members about what happened, what we've done to address the problems, etc. *[Specifics on this topic have been edited out while litigation is ongoing.]*

This segued into discussing the various updates to bylaws, policies, procedures, etc., including documenting existing policies and practices. It was mentioned previously, but this let me talk about some specific additions and that it was important to our overall governance improvement efforts.

We were kicked out of our room after that due to time limits, but several people came up to me afterwards and expressed their thanks for what we're all doing. I think these meetings continue to be quite important for our organization.

7. Miscellaneous

Cristina Collier from Georgia talked to me after the meeting and asked if she could use the scoresheet as part of an article she was writing. I agreed, and gave her the standard guidelines for using BJCP materials. I think it's going to be in the Southern Brewing News. (Update: she sent me the article, and it's quite favorable. I'm requesting permission to post it on our web site. When I get a clean copy, I'll send it on to Ed.)

I had a few more side meetings with people, including several people who give exam prep classes. I asked them to think about turning their courses into materials we can put on our web site. I asked if they could tape the audio and provide whatever slides and supplemental materials they use so we could use the training as sort of a self-paced podcast program. It's something worth following up on later.

[Closing notes on how the Board would follow-up on items presented in the report]