

Here Come da Judge

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Whenever I tell people I'm a beer judge, they often get a sly look on their face like they're sharing an inside joke. *Wink, wink, nudge, nudge, say no more.* "You get to drink free beer? Sounds easy! Where do I sign up?"

If only it were that simple. It might sound trite, but judging beer is a lot more work than it sounds, particularly if you want to do a good job at it. When homebrewers enter competitions, they're hoping for an honest evaluation of their beer and practical suggestions for improvement (well, that plus some prizes). In order to fulfill this promise, a good beer judge relies on practical knowledge of beer styles, brewing processes, troubleshooting, as well as good sensory evaluation skills. That's fine, but how does a prospective judge gain this knowledge and learn these skills?

Fortunately, there is an organization that can help. The Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP) is a group serving the needs of over 2,000 active beer judges. Its mission is to help people understand and appreciate world beer styles, and to develop good judging skills.

Getting Involved

You don't have to be a member of the BJCP to judge in a competition, but it certainly helps. Competition organizers get your name from the BJCP and contact you when events are held in your area. If you're not in the BJCP or want to search for competitions or beer-related events in a wider region, look at the sidebar "Finding Local Events."

The BJCP provides a wide range of educational and reference materials for judges.

A comprehensive beer, mead and cider style guideline helps judges understand world beer styles and locate good commercial examples. While designed as a reference for judges in a competition setting, the style guidelines are also a great training tool.

Resources designed to help prepare a judge for the BJCP exam (e.g. Exam Study Guide, Mastering the BJCP Exam presentation, sample scoresheets) are quite helpful for any judge. They also provide links to other books and references for self-study. Training, reading, self-study and practice will only get you so far, however.

The best way to learn about judging is to steward or judge at a local competition. If you volunteer to steward, you can observe the process, taste the beers, listen to the comments of the judges, and review their scoresheets. If you volunteer as a novice judge, you can fill out scoresheets and take part in the discussion. In either case, be sure to identify yourself to the other judges as a person interested in learning. Most judges will be happy to take some extra time to explain things to you, or to point out common tastes or faults in beer. If you are unsure of anything, ask questions!

Learning to Evaluate Beer

Whether you are tasting beer by yourself, with a group of other beer enthusiasts, or with other judges at a formal competition, there are several basic steps that you should follow when evaluating a beer.

1. Understand the style. Before you even open the bottle, make sure you know what to expect. Read the style guidelines. If you're not familiar with the style, try to

FINDING LOCAL EVENTS

Hooking up with other beer geeks at local events are a great way to get involved. Here are a few ways to find places where you can taste or judge beer, or to meet people of similar interests.

The AHA and BJCP maintain Web pages with competition information; the AHA site has information about both homebrewing and professional competitions. The AHA and the BJCP cross-post their competitions, so they should contain similar data. However, it's always best to check both sources.

- **BJCP Competitions:**

<http://www.bjcp.org/compsch.html>

- **AHA Homebrew Events:**

<http://www.beertown.org/homebrewing/events.asp>

- **AHA Professional Events:**

<http://www.beertown.org/craftbrewing/events.asp>

The best way to find local beer geeks is to drop in on a homebrew club meeting. Find clubs in your area using the **AHA club locator** at <http://www.beertown.org/homebrewing/listings.asp>

Other suggestions:

- Check your local papers for weekend events. In the summer, there are often many festivals, state or county fairs, and other tasting-related events.
- Talk to other local beer geeks and see if they have mailing lists or other resources for local activities.
- Check with local homebrew shops, good beer stores. Ask a lot of questions.
- Try cross-training. Go to wine tasting events. You might also find information about meads or ciders at fall festivals, Renaissance Faires, and the like.

sample some of the commercial examples cited in the guidelines.

2. Try to identify and describe what your senses perceive. Pay attention to the relative intensity of perceptions. Try to focus on one sensation at a time, and look for subtle flavors and aromas after the prominent ones have been noted.

3. Many aromatics in beer are quite volatile and tend to dissipate rapidly. Quickly

sniff a beer after it's poured to detect these. Also note how the aroma changes over time.

4. Take a look at the beer, preferably by holding it up to a light. Observe the color, clarity and head formation and retention.

5. Take a sip of the beer. Assess different flavors of ingredients (malt, hops, yeast, water), and also the strength, dryness, balance, carbonation, mouthfeel, finish, and aftertaste of the beer. Note any off flavors or unusual characteristics. Take small sips and assess different elements with each sip.

6. Observe how your impressions change over time. If a beer is too cold when poured, its character often becomes more apparent as it warms.

Some of these steps can be quite difficult, particularly if you don't have a well-developed vocabulary of beer terminology or don't have much experience in differentiating your perceptions. When choosing the right word or phrase to describe a particular aspect of a beer, try to identify what you smell, see or taste in the greatest detail possible, including both quantity and quality. For example, if you smell hops, are they strong or weak? Do they have a floral, citrusy or earthy aroma? Can you identify them as English, American or noble? Try to identify secondary characteristics not just the dominant ones. Be specific; don't use subjective words like "good" or "appropriate" if you really mean "rich caramel malt taste" or "strong Cascade hop aroma."

If you have trouble differentiating between similar flavors, aromas, or colors, try different samples side-by-side. See if you can detect differences and then describe them. The more accurately you learn to tell the difference between similar beers, the better judge you'll be. If you don't understand what common faults taste like (for example, diacetyl), ask other judges to point out good examples when they find them. Or ask other judges to describe the faults in terms you might understand (for example,

“diacetyl reminds me of buttered movie theatre popcorn”).

When assessing a beer in a competition setting, you have to do more work than simply describe the beer you’re sampling. You also have to judge how well the beer matches the style guidelines, and offer suggestions when the beer has flaws either in the technical brewing process or in stylistic accuracy. The standard BJCP scoresheet helps you collect and organize your thoughts, as well as providing helpful definitions of terms and reminders of characteristics to assess.

Scoresheets Facilitate Communication

A beer scoresheet accomplishes three basic goals: it provides a standardized means to conduct competitions; it records all pertinent feedback from judge to brewer; and it allows beers to be ranked. While all brewers like to win competitions, most are seeking a professional evaluation of their beer and hope to receive helpful guidance on improving their brewing. The means by which this is communicated to the brewer is the scoresheet.

Since brewers are paying for the evaluation of their beer in a competition, it is very important for judges to take the scoresheet seriously. If brewers do not receive value for their entry fees, they will not enter competitions again. Therefore, it is also vital for organizers and judge directors to seek competent beer judges who understand this process.

A properly completed scoresheet should display five basic qualities: accuracy, consistency, completeness, legibility and professionalism. Beers should be scored appropriately for their quality. All beers should be judged similarly and fairly. A judge should be thorough in describing all perceptions, since skimpy scoresheets are infuriating to entrants. If entrants cannot read the comments, judges are not adding value. Con-

structive criticism delivered with a positive tone is much more useful than a simple recitation of faults.

There are strong parallels between the process of evaluating a beer and filling out a scoresheet. The scoresheet is actually structured to facilitate recording judge perceptions and comments. The sections of the scoresheet (aroma, appearance, flavor, mouthfeel, and overall impression) are listed in the same order that a judge should use in assessing the beer. Each section contains helpful reminders on the attributes to be assessed (for example, the flavor section says “comment on malt, hops, fermentation characteristics, balance, finish/aftertaste, and other flavor characteristics”). Try to say something about each of those elements, even if you’re noting the absence of them (such as, “aroma lacks hops”).

Phases of Completing the Scoresheet

I usually teach people to assess a beer and record comments on a scoresheet in three phases: perception, appreciation, and feedback. In the perception phase, the judge simply records all aroma, appearance, flavor and mouthfeel perceptions without making any value judgments on them. It is helpful to mention characteristics in the order that you perceive them, and to try to quantify their intensity or strength. For example, if you detect hops in the aroma, were they the first thing you smelled? How strong are they in relation to the other aromatics? Also try to be specific about the nature or quality of the perception. For example, rather than saying you tasted “malt,” can you say whether it was grainy, bready, toasty, roasty, or caramel-like? When you can use these qualifiers in describing your perceptions, you are passing on much more useful information to the brewer.

In the appreciation phase of completing the scoresheet, the judge should relate perceptions to the requirements of the style

guidelines. Here is where knowledge of beer styles is most useful. Make sure your comments reflect the proper beer style, not your personal prejudices. A beer does not have to be technically flawed to be stylistically inaccurate. For example, you might note that a beer has a “beautiful golden color with brilliant clarity” but then go on to state “unfortunately a dry stout should be dark black and opaque.” Be sure you know the style you are judging, and evaluate it constructively.

In the feedback phase, the judge should suggest corrective actions to the brewer for any technical or stylistic faults noted during the assessment. These corrective actions might include suggestions on ways to improve ingredient selection, equipment handling, brewing process, or packaging of the beer. Don’t make undue assumptions about how the beer was made; if you don’t know, don’t guess.

Checklist for Evaluating Beer in Competitions

Here’s a quick set of reminders on how to evaluate a beer and fill out a scoresheet in homebrew competitions:

- Before the beer is poured, take a look at the bottle. Is the fill level too high or low? Is there a telltale infection ring? Is it bottle-conditioned? Note your observations.
- When you open the bottle, listen for the *pffft*. Watch out for gushers. Note anything out of place.
- Pour the beer down the center of a clean, clear glass or hard plastic cup. Adjust your pour based on the observed carbonation to give the beer a good presentation.
- Immediately take a sniff. Write down your perceptions under Aroma. Don’t score it yet.
- Take a look at it. Note the color, clarity and head character. Assess it based on the style. Write in a score for Appearance.
- Sniff it again. Have the perceptions changed? Write down your opinions on how well it matches the style.
- Take a taste. Write down the first flavors you detect. Describe all aspects of the flavor profile, noting the most dominant ones first.
- Take a second taste. Record additional impressions and opinions. Assess the taste against the style guidelines.
- Take a third taste. Concentrate on body and mouthfeel. Write down a score for Mouthfeel.
- Swirl the cup and take another sniff. Record any final impressions and enter a score for Aroma.
- Take a final taste and record final thoughts. Enter a score for Flavor.
- Provide overall comments and feedback to the brewer under Overall Impression. Enter a score based on your desire to have another (basically, how enjoyable it was to drink).
- Calculate your total score. Adjust it to match the Scoring Guidelines on the scoresheet.
- Double-check your math. Make sure you have filled out the score sheet legibly and completely. Mark any checkboxes in the Descriptor Definitions column if they apply.
- Make sure you have given constructive criticism and accurate feedback to the brewer. Suggest ways to improve the beer, particularly if you have deducted for faults or stylistic inaccuracy.
- When all judges have finished, discuss your thoughts. If other judges detect something you missed, see if you can find it. Adjust your score if necessary so all scores fall within five points.

Practice working quickly yet thoroughly so you can complete your individual assessment of one beer within six to 10 minutes. Try to have a final score assigned within 10–12 minutes, 15 at the most. Pace yourself, and take breaks if necessary. Keep your palate cleansed and stay sober and objective.

Make suggestions when unsure (for example if a beer had too much body and residual sweetness a judge might note, “if this was an all-grain beer, try mashing at a lower temperature; if this was an extract beer, try a more fermentable extract”).

When completing scoresheets in a homebrew competition, a judge should rely upon a mental checklist to ensure all aspects are properly evaluated. A summary of the process I use is presented in the sidebar “Checklist for Evaluating Beer in Competitions.”

Practice Makes Perfect

When it comes to judging, there is no substitute for practical experience. While the best comprehension can be gained from actual judging in a homebrew competition, don’t overlook the value of structured practice either in private sessions or with other judges in informal settings.

Anytime you taste a beer, get in the habit of running through your mental beer evaluation checklist. If you aren’t writing anything down or discussing your impressions with others, this exercise should take less than a minute and require no more than two or three sips. Then you can relax and enjoy the rest of your beer as your personal reward.

When practicing beer evaluation with other judges, discuss your perceptions and impressions. Try to learn if you are particularly sensitive to certain aromas or flavors, or if you have a sensory “blind spot.”

If you have structured training sessions, be sure to practice recording your perceptions and comments on scoresheets. This will help you increase your judging speed. Strive to understand the characteristics of ideal examples of each style. In a practice session, consider trying good commercial examples along with homebrew versions of the same styles.

Whether you record full comments or not, get in the habit of assigning a numeric score to the beers you taste. Compare your

ONLINE JUDGING RESOURCES

There are a large number of beer, brewing and judging sites and discussion groups on the Internet. While many resources exist, here are a few select sites and mailing lists that I find particularly helpful. Keep in mind that learning about beer styles, tasting world class beers, understanding brewing processes, and developing evaluation skills are all important for judging.

- **BJCP Web Site:** www.bjcp.org. Authoritative source of data on the program; includes major sections on exams, competitions, beer styles, and administration. Be sure to look at the Exam Study Guide (www.bjcp.org/study.html), the Mastering the BJCP Exam presentation (www.bjcp.org/mastering.pdf), and sample scoresheets (www.bjcp.org/examscores.html).
- **JudgeNet:** online email digest for judges, <http://www.synchro.com/judge>. To subscribe, send a message to mailserver@synchro.com with *subscribe judge* as the message subject or body.
- **Homebrew Digest (HBD):** online digest for homebrewers, <http://hbd.org/digest/>. To subscribe, send a message to homebrewrequest@hbd.org with *subscribe* in the message body. Back issues are available at <http://hbd.org/archives.shtml>.
- **Usenet Brewing Group:** rec.crafts.brewing. Wide range of topics.
- **Beer Advocate:** www.beeradvocate.com. Interesting collection of comments and information about commercial beers, including ratings.
- **Pubcrawler:** www.pubcrawler.com. Find and rate breweries, brewpubs and beer bars around the country.
- **How to Brew:** www.howtobrew.com. John Palmer’s online book on brewing is a great reference for technical brewing issues.

There are many portals, forums and general beer sites on the web. My apologies to all whom I’ve omitted from this list due to lack of space.

scores to other judges so you can develop a sense of scoring calibration. This is often the most difficult skill to learn, and can only be gained through practice with others.

Homebrew clubs often organize BJCP study groups. Even if you don’t plan on tak-

ing the exam, these classes can provide a wealth of information on beer, brewing and judging. Most classes will try to sample good examples of all the beer styles in the BJCP guidelines. The interaction with other enthusiasts and ability to ask questions enhances the learning experience. If your local club doesn't plan on offering a course, there's a good outline in the BJCP Exam Study Guide; organize one yourself.

Don't overlook online resources (see the sidebar "Online Judging Resources" for more information). There is a wealth of Web-based information that can facilitate self-study. Communities of brewers, judges, and beer enthusiasts are never shy in discussing their opinions, and can supplement your local resources.

Gordon Strong has been a home-brewer since 1996 and a beer judge since 1997. He is the ninth person to reach the Grand Master I beer judge rank, reached the Master rank faster than any other judge in the program, and is currently third in overall BJCP experience points. He lives in Beavercreek, Ohio.