So You Want to Be a Beer Judge

by Gordon Strong
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 more than 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, see 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 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 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 theater popcorn”).

When assessing a beer in a competition setting, you have to do more 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. Constructive 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 their 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 stylishly 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. 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

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 e-mail digest for judges, www.synchro.com/judge. To subscribe, send a message to mailserver@synchro.com with “subscribe judge” as the message subject or body.


Usenet Brewing Group: rec.crafts.brewing. Wide range of topics.


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 I’ve omitted from this list due to lack of space.
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 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 taking 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.

Whatever sources of information you choose, the only limiting factor is your own motivation. Do some research, find local enthusiasts, get involved, build up your confidence and gain experience. Finally, remember to share what you’ve learned with others—the world always needs more knowledgeable beer judges.

Gordon Strong has been a homebrewer 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.

David Houseman lives in Chester Springs, Pa. He has been a homebrewer for 13 years and a BJCP judge for 11 years, progressing to the Grand Master II Level. He has been on the AHA Board of Advisers since 1998 and is the current chairman. He is the BJCP competition director and a member of the style guide committee. He has a wife, two kids, a cat and a dog and when not brewing is often seen on local soccer pitches as a USSF referee. While he enjoys all beer styles and brews most of them, a Guinness draught is his session beer unless he’s visiting his favorite watering hole, Victory Brewing Company.

Beth Zangari has been brewing and judging since 1992. She was instrumental in founding the Hangtown Association of Zymurgy Enthusiasts (HAZE) and the Queen of Beer Women’s Homebrewing Competition in 1994. She recently achieved the BJCP Master level, and humbly requests the forgiveness of all whom she may have offended along the path. She lives in Placerville, Calif. with her husband Craig and many cats.

Scott Bickham lives in Corning, N.Y. and has been brewing and judging since 1991. He has a Ph.D in condensed matter physics. He has judged in more than 75 homebrew competitions, is a Grand Master II judge, and has been either Exam Director or Associate Exam Director of the BJCP since 1995.

Gordon Strong lives and brews in Beavercreek, Ohio. Since taking up brewing in 1996, he has brewed more than 90 batches of beer, mead and cider. He joined the Beer Judge Certification Program in 1997 and achieved the rank of Master I faster than anyone in the program. He currently ranks third in the BJCP in experience points. He is chairman of the current ad hoc BJCP Style Guideline Committee and is the principal author of most new style descriptions.
Sierra Nevada Pale Ale: Brewed by Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., Chico, Calif.

Category/subcategory: 6A American Pale Ale

Overall Impression:
This is a well-crafted beer that was unfortunately mishandled or served beyond its prime. The exceptional balance saves this beer, but more fresh hop aroma and flavor are needed. (6/10)
Total Score: (32/50)

Bottle Inspection:
Commercial bottle, purchased locally.

Aroma:
Initial citrusy hops fade quickly into a toasty, bready, slightly sweet malt bouquet. Clean fermentation character. No esters. Slightly stale. Expected more hops. (8/12)

Appearance:
Large, off-white head settles slowly. Golden amber color. Moderate haze from small particles in suspension. (2/3)

Flavor:
Some toasty, bready malt along with a light citrusy hop flavor. Clean fermentation character, no esters. Slightly woody hop flavor persists into aftertaste. (13/20)

Mouthfeel:
Medium to medium-full body. Moderately high carbonation. Fairly smooth. Body seems very full for style. (3/5)

Overall Impression:
Once an American classic, now seems a shadow of its former self. Seems dumbed down to little more than a Blonde Ale. Where have all the hops gone? Seems very malty, sweet and full-bodied. Possibly suffering from age (can't tell from the bottle.) I’d mash lower to cut the body and crank the hops up by one-third throughout. (6/10)
Total score: (32/50)
Category: 6C California Common Beer
Anchor Steam: Brewed by Anchor Brewing, San Francisco, Calif.

**Anchor Steam**

Anchor Steam is the arch prototype for the California Common Style, this beer seems very close would help to distinguish it from the American Amber since this beer seems very close to that style. (8/10)

**Bottle Inspection:**
Commercial bottle. Purchased locally.

**Aroma:**
Woody floral hop aroma, toasty caramel maltiness. A vague quality reminiscent of newly turned earth. (10/12)

**Appearance:**
Deep golden with amber undertones, brilliant clarity. Head forms thickly with even bubbles, but dissipates quickly to a ring of foam, could be my glass. This dusting remains to the end, leaving a lace on the glass. (3/3)

**Flavor:**
Rich caramel malt balanced with a firm hop bitterness that lingers. Alcohol is evident in this sample. A meaty substantiveness follows a woody hop quality, perhaps a waft bit of DMS showing. As the beer warms, a bit of soapy, cardboardiness creeps in reflecting the beer’s age. Also appearing is a pleasant stone-fruit (almond/apricot) flavor distinctive to this style, though at low levels in this sample. (17/20)

**Mouthfeel:**
Medium body with firm carbonation. Prickly to the mouth, but not gassy; bitter, but not astringent. Alcohol is evident, though not warming. Pleasant. (5/5)

**Overall Impression:**
A very drinkable beer. While Anchor Steam is the arch prototype for the California Common Style, additional hop flavor and aroma would help to distinguish it from the American Amber since this beer seems very close to that style. (8/10)

**Total score:** (40/50)