



# Think Like a Judge

by Gordon Strong

**A**s a homebrewer and beer judge, brewers often ask me how they can improve their chances for winning in a competition. After I give them the tongue-in-cheek answer—"brew better beer"—I usually start talking about how judges assess beer and what separates an average entry from one that medals. The more you can anticipate how a judge will evaluate your beer, the better chance you have of providing an entry that will score well.

This really isn't an article about brewing, per se; it's more about planning, analysis and troubleshooting. Let's assume that you have read the Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP) Style Guidelines, that you understand how to brew good beer, and that you can recognize a fresh beer from a stale one. What else can you do? What are your control points? Can you realistically improve a beer already brewed?

## Planning Ahead

Competition entries are evaluated against style guidelines, usually the most current BJCP. Before brewing a beer, always check the guidelines to make sure your recipe fits the style. Most recipe software will check the basic gravity, bitterness and color parameters of your recipe, but that only gives you the most superficial indication of style fidelity. You really need to dig into the individual aroma, appearance, flavor and mouthfeel sections of the descriptions to get the full picture. The comments, history and ingredients sections often provide important clues.

If you are brewing for a specific competition like the National Homebrew Competition, think about the best age for the style of beer and take that into account when planning your brewing calendar. Beers that are paler,

lower gravity, and less hopped will not store as well as stronger, darker, hoppier beers. Some styles are known to go off quickly, like hefeweizen. Freshness matters; try to have your beers at peak condition when they reach the judges. In a competition with multiple rounds, figure out which beers can be re-brewed.

Some beer styles age very well and can be stored for several years. Bottle these carefully (or designate longer-term storage kegs). Treat them well, keeping them cool, dark and undisturbed. Higher-gravity beers will often develop much better complexity over time. If you are concerned about drinking your beers before they are ready, adopt a laddered brewing approach. Brew replacement batches for your high gravity beers before you need them, so you're always using your oldest beers while replacing with fresh beer that will age.

Regardless if your beer has just been brewed or if it has been laid down for years, taste and judge your beer against the style guidelines before entering it. If there's something wrong, decide if it can be fixed or if it's not worth entering. Repeat this process before shipping the beer to the competition if considerable time has elapsed between entry and shipment (e.g. in the NHC second round).

## How Judging Really Works

Let me tell you some dirty little secrets about judging. Judging is inherently subjective and judge skill can vary widely. Judge rank is not necessarily the best indicator of judging ability. Not all judges will have familiarity with the styles they are judging. Some outspoken judges can intimidate judges into going along with their scores.

Competitions are often stressed to find enough judges and will take nearly anyone. Judges in training often judge as a learning experience. Judges can have off days. The competition judging environment may be less than ideal. Beers may be served at inappropriate temperatures.

These issues don't arise at every competition, but they can happen. The BJCP, competition organizers and senior judges try to mitigate these risks through education, training, standardized reference materials, common processes and procedures, and general peer pressure. We like to think of judging in idealized terms, but you can brew a great beer and still get hosed in a competition. It happens to all of us. There's nothing you can do about it, so don't dwell on these points.

What you can do is be aware of these problems and try to "drive defensively." If you produce beers that are recognizable as being in-style by a wider range of judges, you will have an advantage. If your beers taste good over a wide temperature range, you are less subject to cellaring and stewarding problems. If you send a clear beer without sediment, you are less prone to mishandling. If your beer doesn't have typical flaws, judges will give it closer attention.

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The style guidelines provide the common link between brewers and judges, and form the standard against which your beer is judged. The guidelines are important, but not all judges follow them religiously. Sometimes they are just used to check a certain parameter ("is medium body allowed?"). Judges can't measure gravity, bitterness or alcohol level, so the numerical style parameters are not checked. The judge can only apply subjective measures ("hmm, I can taste the alcohol, it must be more than 5 percent"). It is much more important to get the overall impression of

the beer right, such as the malt-hop balance, malt and hop flavors and aromas, color, body and carbonation.

If your beer is served too cold, then the malt character will be suppressed and the beer can seem more bitter. Judges can't determine IBUs, so they can only go based on their impression of bitterness. Look at the description of the bitterness level rather than the specs, and be aware that malty sweetness will offset the impression of bitterness. If you aim for the midpoint of the bitterness range, your beer is less sensitive to temperature issues.

Some judges overstate problems or tend to focus on easy-to-find problems, like color, clarity and carbonation. Don't give them that chance. Make sure your beer is within the allowable color range, preferably hitting the first color described in the guidelines. Hazy beers often get marked down, but this is a real killer for meads and ciders—they absolutely won't win if not crystal clear. If you bottle-condition beers, you can get sediment kicked up in transit. Some judges may give you a break. But if your beer is kegged, then there really is no excuse for a hazy beer. Fix it before you bottle it. Carbonation should only be worth a point or two on the scoresheet, but a flat beer can ruin the whole drink-

bet. However, for styles that are known to have big flavors (e.g. bocks, barleywines, IPAs), it's often better to go big so you get noticed. Avoid ingredients and processes that can introduce faults or be mistaken as faults. Heavy kettle caramelization in a Scotch Ale is often mistaken for diacetyl. Using smoked malts (especially peat smoked malt) can add phenolics. Some yeast produce more byproducts than others, and those can be misrecognized by judges. A clean fermentation character is almost always rewarded.

Some styles allow for additional information to be provided. If there is something about your beer that could be confusing, let the judges know what to expect. They want guidance about how to judge your beer. If you don't give them information they expect, they may hold it against you (even subconsciously). With any style that has multiple variations (e.g. Foreign Stout, American Wheat/Rye, Bière de Garde), give an indication of which version you intended.

### Analyzing Your Beer

The best way to analyze your beer is to train to become a beer judge; learn structured tasting and how to apply the style guidelines. Judge in actual competitions with BJCP judges and observe the process, take part in the discussions and develop the skills. Judge in different cities or regions to get a better cross-section of judge opinions; don't just talk to the same people all the time. If you are able to objectively review your beer, you have solved the most difficult step.

If you don't have the skills or objectivity to review your own beer, organize a group review with your club or with local judges. They can fill out a scoresheet or just give opinions, but you need to determine if the beer fits the style, if it has any flaws, and get their opinion on how well it would do. If you have multiple batches to choose from, they can help you select the best one.

When you brew a beer, you usually have a beer style in mind. The resulting beer might not be a great example. However, it could fit another style quite well. You aren't being judged on how well your

ing experience and result in deductions in every section. Overcarbonation is less penalized, since it's easy for a judge to shake out some bubbles.

Unfortunately, some judges look for a reason not to judge your beer. The most common excuses are that it's out of style ("you should have entered it elsewhere") or that it has a fault ("I get DMS"). Then you get a lecture about the other style or the fault rather than an evaluation of your beer. Brewing clean beers that hit the midpoint flavors of a style is a safe

recipe concept was executed, you're being judged on how well your beer fits the style guidelines. Keep an open mind about where something might be entered. Your big American pale ale might score better as an IPA, for instance.

Beer style descriptions are often quite broad (Old Ale and Mild), and allow for a wide range of creativity and interpretation on the part of the brewer. Other style definitions are quite narrow (Kölsch and California Common), and can seem like clones of specific beers. However, not all combinations of individual components listed in the guidelines make sense for the style. You have to consider all the elements of a beer together to get the overall essence of the style.

The concept and general balance of the style are more important than individual style numbers or specific descriptions. Your beer has to evoke the beer style in the mind of the judges. It has to embody the spirit and intent of the style, as well as being fresh and well made.

Keep an eye out for easy-to-spot (and easy-to-adjust) flaws, like clarity and carbonation. Try your beers at normal serving temperature but also at fridge temperature, since you don't know how the beers will be served. Set up a flight of the same style and judge your beer against fresh commercial examples.

Taste the beer and think how a judge would fill out the scoresheet and assign the score. For any areas marked down, can you adjust them? Make notes and try to correct the issues in future batches. If you bottle your beer, this might be one of your only options. If your beer isn't right and can't be fixed, don't waste your money entering weak beers.

## Adjusting Your Beer

If you detect small problems in your beers, you may be able to improve them for competition. Clarity, carbonation and balance can be easily adjusted. If you keg your beers, they are much easier to adjust. If you bottle your beers, you can still follow these steps but you first have to decant your beer into a working container. I use either 1- or 2-liter soda

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bottles for this purpose, depending on how much finished beer I need.

If your beer is undercarbonated, put a carbonator cap on the soda bottle, chill the beer to near freezing, and shake CO<sub>2</sub> into it at 30 PSI for 10-15 seconds. If your beer is overcarbonated, keep the beer at room temperature and vent off pressure every hour until it's at the right level. You can gently swirl the bottle to speed the process. Obviously, sanitize the bottles and purge air from them with CO<sub>2</sub> before doing any transfers or manipulations.

If your beer is hazy, you can fine it using super-kleer or sparkalloid. These are meant for wine, but work with beer, mead and cider as well. It's best to use these in bulk in a carboy or keg, but you can use them in smaller quantities in soda bottles too. I've only had one occasion where one or both didn't work, and that was cleared using bentonite followed by sparkalloid a few days later. These can take some time to work, although I've had them do their thing in a couple hours. Wait for them to clear (chilling helps), and then decant off into another soda bottle. Carbonate if necessary. Note that you'll lose some beer in the transfer, so start with extra beer.

If your beer is lacking some key component, you can try blending with another of your beers. For example, if your beer needs more hop character, mix in a little IPA. If you have beers that are too malty, hoppy, roasty, caramelly or estery, save them for blending. Two batches of the same beer can often add complexity. You often have to make multiple trials to get it right.

Whenever you make changes to your beer, you will have to taste it again. Repeat your adjustments until you're happy with the results; you need to use the same judge assessment criteria every time you taste. Save carbonation for the final adjustment. I like to let the beer absorb CO<sub>2</sub> overnight before testing the carbonation level again.

When you are done with all your adjustments and it passes your judge test, you are ready to bottle for competition. Chill the soda bottle and your sanitized, covered competition bottles to near freezing. Slowly vent the pressure from the soda bottle and pour the beer gently down the side of the competition bottle. The beer shouldn't foam much if everything is at the same temperature. Pour until foam starts to come out of the competition bottle and the fill level (below the foam) seems right. Immediately cap on top of the foam. The cap-on-foam method drives out any air from the bottle. Clean the bottle, label and it's ready to go.

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