



## Beer Tasting Basics

### ***What Should I be looking for?***

There are four main ingredients in beer; malted barley, hops, yeast, and water. Each of these ingredients lends a distinctive character to a beer's color, flavor and aroma. Additional ingredients, called *adjuncts*, can also be added to beer to effect flavor, aroma, and body. These could include unmalted grains such as corn or rice, as well as sugar, spices, fruit and others. For this simple overview I will focus on malt, hops, and yeast.

What character does each ingredient contribute to a beer? Let's look at them individually.

**Malt:** Malted barley is the backbone of beer. Next to water it is the primary ingredient and contributes significantly to the flavor and aroma. Malt provides the sugars that are fermented by the yeast, so it is also one factor in determining the alcohol content of beer. There are four main types of malted grain: kilned or base malts, crystal malts, toasted malts, and roasted malts.

Descriptors that describe the flavor and aroma characteristics of malt include: grainy, cracker, bready, bread crust, toast, roast, coffee, sweet, chocolate, nutty, toffee, and caramel. Some of the darker toasted malts may even impart dark or dried fruit flavors such as prune, plum or raisin.

**Hops:** Hops are the cone-like flower of a climbing vine (actually called a bine). They are the spice of beer. Hops provide beer with bitterness that tempers the sweetness of the malt, and contribute to flavor and aroma as well. Levels of hop bitterness in beer can range from very low to very high depending on the style.

Descriptors that describe the flavor and aroma character of hops include: earthy, grassy, floral, perfume, spicy, minty, citrus, grapefruit, and resinous or piney.

**Yeast:** It is said that brewers make *wort* (unfermented beer), but yeast makes beer. Yeast ferments the sugars from the malt to create alcohol and carbon dioxide. In the process it also produces by-products that influence taste and aroma. The by-products include *esters* that lend beer fruity notes and *phenols* that give a spicy character. There are two main types of brewers yeast, ale and lager. Ale yeasts ferment at warmer temperatures, roughly 65° - 75°F, and tend to produce beers that have a rounder mouthfeel and a fruitier flavor and aroma profile. Lager yeasts ferment colder, roughly 45°- 55° F, and produce crisp beers with a clean flavor and aroma profile. Additionally, some styles, like Lambic, use wild yeasts and bacteria to create an acidic sourness and "funk" that is not only appropriate in those styles but also surprisingly pleasant.

Descriptors that describe the flavor and aroma characteristics of yeast include: fruity, banana, stone fruits like apricot or cherry, vinous, spicy, pepper, or clove. For beers that use wild yeasts descriptors might include sour, acidic, barnyard, horse blanket, leather, goaty, or wet hay. These are all good things. Trust me.

## ***The Tasting Process***

When evaluating a beer it can be helpful to think about the balance of flavors and aromas that each ingredient provides. A beer might be evenly balanced between malt, hops, and yeast or it might be weighted more heavily to one of the three. For example, Bocks and Scottish Ales are malt-balanced beers, American Pale Ales lean more toward hops, and German Wheat beers along with many Belgian styles favor yeast. This is not to say that the other ingredients don't play a role in each of these styles, only that certain styles will favor the character of one ingredient over the others.

To fully appreciate a beer you want to pay attention to four different elements of the drinking experience, aroma, appearance, taste, and mouthfeel. As you taste a beer, simply note objective observations of what you smell, see, taste, and feel. It can then be useful to reflect on your overall impression of the beer, making subjective notes about your drinking experience. Was it pleasant to drink? What stood out to you about it? Would you order another?

### ***Now let's go through the process.***

**Aroma:** Because many of the volatile aromatic compounds are carried out of the glass with the foam at pouring, you want to first consider the aroma. Stick your nose in the glass, take a few big whiffs and note what you perceive. Look for malt character, hop character, and yeast character. Note quality and relative intensity of each. Are there any other smells? Use some of the descriptors listed above to help you describe what you smell.

**Appearance:** When evaluating a beer's appearance you want to consider color, clarity, and head. Beer color ranges from pale yellow through amber, copper, and brown, all the way to an opaque black. Simply note what you see. Most beers will be very clear or *brilliant*. However some, like German Wheat Beers, should be cloudy from suspended yeast. Finally, note the color, texture, and retention of the head. Head color ranges from white to tan. Is the foam's texture creamy like mousse? Are the bubbles fine or large? Are they uniform or is the head *rocky*, meaning it is composed of different sized bubbles. Does the head last or does it dissipate quickly? Does the beer leave *lace* on the side of the glass?

**Flavor:** As with aroma, you want to notice malt, hop, and yeast character, describing the quality of each and the balance between them. Use the descriptors above to help you describe what you perceive. With hops, you also want to note the level of bitterness. Do you notice any other flavors? Finally, you want to note the finish. While wine tasters spit, beer tasters swallow. The reason for this is that certain flavors, like lingering hop bitterness, can only be sensed at the back of the tongue as the beer slides down your throat. Besides that, who wants to spit out good beer?

**Mouthfeel:** This is simply a description of how the beer feels in your mouth. Note the body. Is it light or heavy? What is the carbonation level? Carbonation in beers can run from highly effervescent to nearly flat in some styles. Does the beer have a creamy texture? Do you note any astringency? Astringency, a puckering sensation like you would get from sucking on a teabag, is usually a flaw in beer caused by poor brewing technique. However, it can also be caused by excessive hop bitterness or overuse of dark roasted malts. Do you notice any other palate sensations?