



BeerAppreciation.com

How to Conduct a Successful and Fun Beer Tasting Event

A Guide

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Conduct your own beer tasting event!

Have fun, impress your friends and fool your enemies.



Introduction

Hosting your own beer tasting is fun and is a great ice breaker for a party or charity event. It is inexpensive and it gives you the opportunity to demonstrate and share your beer knowledge, even if that is just a bit more than your guests have. Best of all, a beer tasting event gives you the pleasure of exposing friends, family and acquaintances to the rewarding world of beer diversity.

What follows is [BeerAppreciation.com's](http://BeerAppreciation.com) guide to creating and running your own beer tasting. While a beer tasting should be fun above all things, it can also be educational and intellectually stimulating. With some forethought and planning, and by following this guide, you are likely to have fun and leave your guests with newly found beer interest and knowledge.

Many people ask me, "What about people that don't like beer? What will they do during my tasting event?" Well, the obvious answer (other than a quick sanity check) is that individuals who say they don't like beer probably have never been guided to really good beer, so this is precisely the event for them. They can simply sip at each sample, and maybe they will find a beer they actually like. If all I ever had experienced was a mass produced American lager, I might feel the same way. For those who avoid alcoholic beverages but would like to be part of the event, there is plenty of work to do, such as pouring samples, collecting cups and passing around bread. If they want to be involved, let them help you out.

This guide is a detailed resource for those who are interested in hosting a beer tasting event. You need not scrupulously follow all of the elements outlined below, but you

should review and select ideas from each section. Your role above all is to entertain and educate – introduce beer appreciation to your guests!



The author (standing) leads a beer tasting at Ortino's Northside, Zeiglersville, Pa.

1. Decide what kind of tasting you would like to host

Choose a tasting theme for your event; it makes the event more fun and is a conversation starter. There are essentially four types of tasting themes: horizontal, vertical, blind and holiday.

- The easiest to arrange is the **horizontal** or multiple style tasting. In this type you select several beers of different styles – usually selections that are distinct in color, taste and strength. This gives the taster the opportunity to taste new styles and learn the diversity that the world of beer offers. (This theme is not an opportunity to clean out the leftover beers in your fridge. Choose fresh, memorable and interesting beers for your event.)

Your beer tasting is a great opportunity to teach people about beer and explode a few common beer myths. For example, a common misperception is that the darker the beer the stronger it is in flavor and alcohol content. Some of the darker lagers, such as Double Bocks and Schwartzbeir, can disprove that myth, as can Dixie's Blackened Voodoo which is light in body and flavor. Belgian style ales, are strong but lighter in color.



Darker colored beer is not always stronger or bigger in flavor.

- A **vertical tasting** compares beers from one style, region or brewer. This is ideal for exploring a particular style, such as lagers or stouts, or a region, such as Belgium or Germany (and may include beers styled according to a particular region though not necessarily brewed there.) Or, feature a vertical tasting from the selections of one great brewery. Try great local breweries if available. In the greater Philadelphia region, examples would include Victory Brewing Company, Yards, Stoudt's or DogfishHead.

The most popular version of the vertical tasting is by style. An educational and entertaining version of the style tasting is to start with one of the more popular beers, such as Yuengling lager or Budweiser, and then offer craft or imported beers of the same style such as a German lager, an American craft brewed lager such as Yards, and then a dry Japanese Lager.

An advanced vertical tasting would compare a set of the same beers of different ages, for example a new vs. a two year old bottle of the Belgian ale, Orval. Most folks would find it difficult to locate aged examples of their favorite beer. Do NOT offer "aged" Heineken that has been sitting in the back of the refrigerator for eight months.

- The **blind tasting** may have the most fun appeal, but is harder for the host to manage. In a blind tasting, typically the tasters do not know the brand or style they are sampling. As host of the tasting, you are the only one (at the outset) to know the identity of the beer samples. You will have to pour in another room, hide the bottles, and keep careful track of which beer is in which glass (and in which order you serve them.) One tip is to use a magic marker to number the cups before you serve them.

Consider your objective in the blind tasting – will you be asking your tasters to pick "the best beer" of the tasting or the preferred beer from a pair of similar selections? Will you be asking them to guess at the brand and/or style? You could

cue tasters by giving them a multiple choice list from which to select brand or style followed by a group review at the end, in which you reveal the identity of the selections.

Be aware that in a blind tasting, you can not expound on the specific beer brands, history or ingredients, as these elements are part of the secret to be revealed at the end of the event. One alternative would be to reveal the beer styles to the tasters (like Porter or IPA) and not the specific brand. For example, while your tasters sample and evaluate the characteristics of the hoppy brew, you can dazzle them with the story of how the British created the IPA style to withstand the journey by sea to British soldiers in India.

Sometimes in a blind tasting, egos are at stake and can be bruised. It is not uncommon that a real beer aficionado will misidentify a common beer or worse, will declare a “Mich lite” as a fine European pilsner. There may be red faces all around when the gaffe is revealed and hard feelings can result. Remember not to gloat, “There but for the grace of beer appreciation go I.”



Fine holiday ales

- **Holiday themes** are popular for tastings and are a particular version of a vertical tasting. It is a fun way to start off a holiday party and a nice ice breaker. Winter holidays offer great Christmas beers and ales. The traditional “Winter Warmers” and other seasonal specialties are easily found. Belgian and other European brewers offer special, strong and potent winter holiday brews.

Other beer holidays can include Oktoberfest (many German and U.S. craft brew “fest beers” are now readily accessible), May Day (Mai Bock’s are traditional, but wheat beers are good for the spring too) and even Halloween. (I don’t recommend apple dunking in beer, however). You can also be creative – why not a Valentine’s Day tasting (cherry and raspberry lambics, along with chocolate flavored beers) or a Thanksgiving tasting with pumpkin and spiced beers?

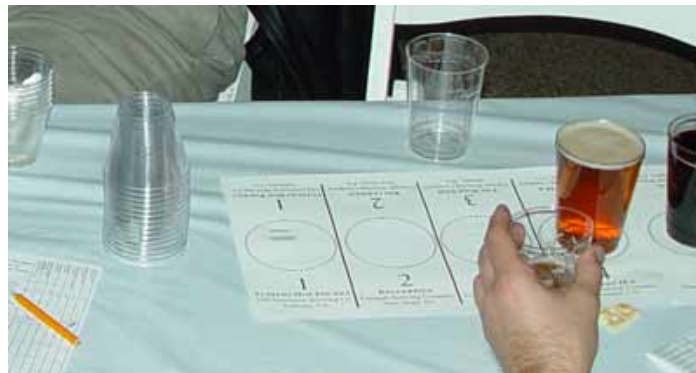
2. Decide the number of beers to taste

Tasters need enough quantity in the mouth to effectively evaluate a beer's characteristics including aroma, appearance, flavor and mouth feel. Usually more than one or two good sips are needed to clear the flavor of previous beers, even with a palate cleanser. Traditionally you should offer eight to ten beers with pours averaging four ounces each, which amounts to 32 to 40 ounces per person (if you pour carefully). A greater amount could inspire several guests could drop out of the event before you get to the appetizers.

BeerAppreciation.com condones moderate and responsible drinking. Be sure that your tasters can arrive home safely or use a designated driver. More beer does not make a better tasting event: after about eight tastes, most people lose the ability to discern differences and qualities in the beers.

Note: We don't spit out our beer in a beer tasting event. Remember that beer is a beverage with a unique balance of flavors. The sweetness of the malt and the bitterness of the hops together give a brew its character. Since the sweet taste buds on the tongue are in front and the bitterness taste buds are in the back, you need to roll it around and swallow to get the full effect. Besides, it does not improve the party atmosphere to watch your friends spit into a bucket.

3. Assemble and prepare your equipment



You will need beer, cups, tasting cards, pencils, hands ...

You will need more than beer selections for your tasting. Here is a list of the other needed supplies.

- **Clear plastic cups or glasses** – While clean glasses are best as they conduct the foam or head of the beer well, hard plastic cups are fine and



are easier to manage. Choose cups are completely clear so that tasters can evaluate the beer's color, carbonation and head. You will need only a six ounce cups to hold the four ounce pours. Have more than enough cups. If you taste eight beers, have at least nine cups per person, which allows one extra for water. Get the widest mouthed cups available, as that permits the best access to the beer's aroma.

- **Tasting cards or place mats** – Create cards or paper lists that name the beers being tasted or, if conducting a blind tasting, indicate blank spaces per beer. Along with the beer style and name (or blanks for the unnamed beers) leave space for tasting notes and tasting/assessment category scores. For an example of a beer tasting scoring process, refer to the section “[How to Taste Beer](#)” on [BeerAppreciation.com](#).

The tasting card can be a nice take-away for your guests and a way for them to better remember the beers and styles they liked best. It is a shame when people can not take advantage of new beer knowledge because they fail to recall the name of a beer they liked. (“What was the name of that great beer we had at the tasting? Blind Flying Dog Porter or something?”)

A neat alternative to the tasting card is the tasting place mat. On a piece of 8 ½” x 11” paper, draw circles where each beer cup will sit. (More than six circles will be tough to fit on one sheet.) Under each circle type or write the beer style and name. Give each taster a placemat and when you serve the samples, place each cup on the appropriate circle. Be careful to put your circles in order. See the “order your beers” section below.

- **Pencils or pens** – Have enough available, and hopefully in decent condition. You do not want to be scrambling at the last minute sharpening old pencil stubs or trying to reincarnate 14 year old Bic pens while your guests are waiting to start.
- **Water** – This is used as a palate cleanser to give your guest's taste buds a break. Use ordinary tap water or a nonsparkling, non flavored bottled water free of additives. Obtain one or more large pitchers so that each taster can have at least two or three glasses of water.
- **Bread or other palate cleansing snack.** White, French or Italian bread is best because it will not affect the tasting experience. Acquire enough bread for each taster to have a bite or two between tastes. Pretzels or peanuts can also work as a palate cleanser. Although salty snacks can skew the taste buds, people can usually disregard the taste. If you offer salty snacks, have plenty of water available. You do not want people gulping down their samples because they are thirsty.

- **A water proof trash can or leftovers container.** Most tasters like to discard their used cups as they go. It allows them to concentrate on the beer at hand. Others like to leave their cups in front of them to later compare with a final sip or ponder their various colors. I recommend allowing your guests easy access to a water proof receptacle so they can stow their remainders. Remind them they need not finish each pour if they have consumed all they need to complete the evaluation.

4. Research your selected beer and styles



Crisp Warstiener Pilsner has light, hoppy characteristics.

Yes, this sound like work, doesn't it? Well, remember that as host for the event, you are also the teacher. Actually, it's fairly easy to find out something about the styles and beers you are offering, and it adds a lot to the tasting event for your guests. By dispensing relevant beer lore along with the beers themselves, you can get conversation rolling. Beer Appreciation thinks that this is the primary difference between a beer tasting event and simply an organized beer drinking session. (Not that there's necessarily anything wrong with that.)

I am not suggesting that you prepare a 20 minute dissertation on the wonders of malted barley or the history of beer in America, which can make your guests unusually thirsty and cause the samples to disappear too quickly once you start the tasting. Unless you are a beer expert and your guests expect a formal talk from you, the information you gather should be offered mostly during the tasting, to add context, entertain and enlighten.

Web sites like ratebeer.com, beerhistory.com, beerinstitute.org, allaboutbeer.com, and the Beer Association (beertown.org) offer information about beer styles and particular brews. Most breweries have sites where you can read their commentaries on their beers and often find interesting historical tidbits and information about a particular beer's ingredients.



Make and have handy notes about what you want to say about each beer and/or style. You also may want to talk a bit about the tasting theme. For example, if you are conducting a vertical tasting on a particular style such as lagers or stouts, you should be able to describe these styles and their distinguishing characteristics. Even in a horizontal tasting, explaining the difference between lagers and ales is valuable for the guests.

5. Help your guests describe a beer's characteristics

One of the most difficult things for many people at a beer tasting is finding the words to describe a beer's characteristics. Take the lead and help the guests to describe some of the flavors, aromas and textures they are experiencing by using some beer tasting terms that they can adopt.

Michael Jackson, Beer Hunter and world's foremost beer expert, described tasting fine American ales this way from his Beerhunter.com website:

"I washed down my meal with the aromatic, fruity, Potomac Pale Ale. With dessert, there was the raisiny, chocolatey, Spout Run Porter. As a digestif: a toffeeish, warming. Strong Ale, at 9.5 per cent alcohol by volume"

While you may not feel comfortable describing a Bass Ale as tasting like passion fruit, you could talk about a Bass' significant bitterness as "mineral-like" and then describe the overall "higher alcohol" taste that characterizes the style. Other terms commonly used to describe beer flavors and aromas are as follows.

For many ales:

Burnt, licorice, smoky, chocolately, hoppy, malty, spicy, sweet, toffeeish, butterscotch, vanilla, nutty, caramel, roasty

For many lagers:

Floral, grassy, dull, bland, bitter, honey, syrupy, cloying, sugar, highly carbonated, banana, sweet corn, skunky (such as the aged beer remainders from the back of your fridge.)

If you are new to beer-tasting vocabulary, practice it at home first; get used to thinking about and describing beer flavors when you drink your next brew.



Enlightened beer taster at the 2005 Book and the Cook event, Philadelphia, Pa.,

6. Set up your tasting room

To set up your tasting event, choose a room that is as free from distraction as possible. Obviously you can not completely control the environment, but adding an air of professionalism and focus will make the event more fun and meaningful.

I personally like using a table that allows people to sit across from and next to each other. A dining room table is fine, and adds the opportunity for conversation and constructive discussion. Just be sure there is enough space and elbow room for the number of beers you pour and some between-tasting food. Some spills and splashes are inevitable, so consider that in choosing or avoiding the use of tablecloths

7. Place your beers in the correct order for the tasting



Beer samples arranged on tasting mats from lightest to darkest

It is best to begin the tasting with the lightest flavored and bodied beer. So, let's say you are doing a horizontal tasting with Guinness Stout, Victory Prima Pils, Sam Adams Boston Lager and Hoegaarden White. My preferred order for this



group would be the more delicate Hoegaarden first, then the Boston Lager, then the bitter Prima Pils, and end with the roasty Guinness stout. You can impair a participant's ability to discern tastes and smells by presenting an overly bitter or strong a beer at the start.

Along with strength of flavor, consider the alcoholic strength and save the strongest for last. This will help your tasters stay focused throughout the event. If you are conducting a tasting of all strong ales (like a Belgian vertical tasting) you may wish to cut down on the total number of selections and instead highlight the complex qualities of each of these fine beers.

8. Other tips for the tasting

Mind when and how you pour the beer

To taste their best, beers should be served at the appropriate temperature – ales cooler than room temperature but not icy cold, and lagers very cold but never in a frosted glass.

You can choose to pour all the beers ahead of time so that your guests will see the full array of selections, or pour them individually as you offer each selection. Advantages of pouring ahead of time are that your guests can compare the appearances of all samples, and the event can move more quickly as you are freer to facilitate and entertain. Disadvantages with pouring ahead are that guests can jump to the next taste before you are ready and, if poured too far in advance, beer can lose carbonation and foam. However, pouring ahead is probably the easiest way to conduct a blind tasting.

Depending on the number of beers and tasters, the sample temperature can be hard to manage completely. It is best to keep lagers in the fridge as long as possible. Alternatively, you can keep the lager bottles in a cooler in the tasting area. It is helpful to remove ales from the refrigerator before the tasting to give them time to warm up a bit, which will improve the amount of aroma and flavor they convey.

Foam or head should be evident in the tasting glass so that the beer is displayed properly and mouth feel is improved, however the appearance of foam will depend on the length of time between the pouring and the drinking as well as the type of vessel.

Well-equipped "beer heads" may have special beer glasses for each beer. Tall, thin pilsner glasses accentuate the carbonation and head, while wide-mouthed ale glasses facilitate the aroma of ales. Using nice and valuable glasses in a tasting event can be a painful experience, usually for the host who will likely lose a glass

or two to exuberance and carelessness during the fun. Plastic is a safer and cheaper choice.



An array of specialty beer glasses

Pacing of the tasting is important

No matter how remarkable the selections, most of your guests probably do not want to ponder each beer's characteristics for more than a couple of minutes. Do not spend too much time on each selection or the thirstier and more easily distracted tasters will be two beers ahead of you before you know it. Pacing can be a challenge for those hosts that tend to digress during the tasting. Remember that your passion for beer may be extreme to the average beer drinker.

Samples can be offered individually or in pairs. The advantage of offering a pair of samples at a time is that the taster can easily compare and contrast qualities of similar beers. You can facilitate the comparison by pointing out differences between two different brands of beers of the same style.

Moving the samples too quickly discourages tasters from fully considering the qualities of the beer's aroma, taste, appearance and mouth feel. About 3-5 minutes per sample or sample pairing is usually sufficient, and you owe it to your guests to keep things at a reasonable pace.



Side by side comparison of amber ales

Actively guide the tasting process

While a tasting is fun, it is important that you keep it interesting by actively guiding the tasting process. You need not be a beer guru to host and effectively manage a tasting. Following a few of these tips can help the event go smoothly.

Remind your guests to clear their palates between beers. As the “foam gets flying” people forget to take a drink of water or bite of bread, and the beer tastes can begin to blend together.

Give your opinion to encourage others. If you hold up a sample and say, “This is a beautiful amber bodied beer and I smell some bread or biscuit-like aroma,” it will coach your guests to think how they feel about the beer. Your words may arouse comments such as, “I don’t get it” or “Tastes more like cough medicine to me,” but you will have them engaged. Be careful not to dominate the conversation. Elicit opinion and comments. I often turn to someone who made a face when they tasted a new beer or who has been quiet throughout, to ask them about what they think about a particular beer. Be encouraging.

The best ways to end it

When the beer samples run out and the event concludes, there are a couple of nice ways to wrap it up. One is to award prizes or give out some trinkets for correct answers to beer trivia questions. The questions should be easy and based on comments you made during the tasting. Questions like “What was invented first, Porter or Lager?” or “In what country is Pilsner Urquell brewed?” are fun and can reinforce at the end of the event some beer education. If you don’t have any beer related giveaways, you can give the winner a four or six-pack of the beer remaining from the tasting.

Another nice wrap-up technique is to have people vote on their preferences. “What was the best beer? What was the worst? What was the most challenging?”

If you are hosting a tasting at someone else's home, at a restaurant or similar location, be sure to thank you hosts and helpers. You might not be invited back otherwise. If assisted by wait staff, be sure to encourage tipping and leave a tip yourself.

Conclusion

Craft brewed and imported beer appreciation is growing quickly nationwide. It is now relatively easy to find a selection of interesting, unusual and tasty beers in your local area that many people may not have tried or even heard of. The educated and experienced beer drinker is finding that drinking less in quantity but more in quality and diversity is very satisfying. You can help your friends, family and acquaintances learn about the ingredients, styles, history and rich culture that are the world of beer and have fun at the same time.

Always remember that serving alcoholic beverages comes with responsibility. New beer drinkers will not be aware of the higher alcoholic content of stronger ales, and that many small tastes of beers can add up to several full sized servings. Be sure your guests keep safety and responsibility in mind, and always make food and coffee a part of the evening. Beer appreciation is fun and educational, so be sure your tasting event leaves your guests the better for it, and that they have pleasant memories of the experience.



Beer tasting at John Harvard's Brew House in Wayne, Pa.

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