



HOW TO ENJOY YOUR BEER

Experts Teach Us Ways To Savor The Drink That Too Often Gets Mindlessly Chugged

Most of us know you're supposed to swirl and sniff a big California Cabernet in a giant wine glass, or linger over a smoky Scotch in a snifter. But when it comes to our beer, we're clueless: We chug our bottles ice cold and let our suds sit around in a plastic pitcher. "With beer it's often drinking without thinking," bemoans Ray Daniels, a former Chicago home-brewer expert who runs Cicerone, one of the country's only beer sommelier certification programs. "We turn our analytical minds off when we drink it. But every beer tells a story," he adds. "It has a beginning and a middle and an end."

Daniels is not talking about cheap six-packs, of course, but craft beer, the modern term for brews designed to be delicious. Daniels' job is training beer professionals how to taste those suds, and how to tell their stories. And step No. 1 for us amateurs, he'd likely tell you, is to take that bottle or can out of the ice-crammed cooler, and pour it into a glass.

What's That Smell

That's because 85 percent of what we describe as "flavor" is actually aroma, says Daniels, and if your beer is too cold or trapped inside a bottle, most of what you perceive as taste isn't free to float into your nose. That all-important organ can process hundreds of chemical compounds in beer from the malt, hops, yeast and spices, he says, while our mouths can handle just five: sour, sweet, salty, bitter and the newly discovered umami. (Or maybe it's actually eight: Modern scientists, says Daniels, are starting to think fat, carbonation and metallic should get added to that list one day, too.)

Smelling is so important to beer professionals that Daniels can define different approaches to the technique. One colleague does the Drive-By, swirling her beer to first release aromatic properties like piney or toasty or nutty, then waving it under her nose in one swift move. Daniels sticks his nose deep into the glass and take many short sniffs, an approach he's christened the Bloodhound. "Beer judges," he admits, "always have little specks of foam on their noses."

Think Deeply

As an ordinary drinker, you might not end up with foam on your face if you sit through one of Greg Engert's tasting dinners, but you will be encouraged to sniff and think, if only because it forces you to enjoy your beer more fully.

Engert is the beer sommelier at the two-story Birch & Barley in Washington, D.C., which has a 120-page manual for staff, stocks 50 draught lines and 500 bottles, including some aged in-house. (Yep, they do that for beer, too.)

At Birch & Barley beers are held at three distinct temperatures designed on what works best for enjoying the beer, all of which are served in glassware designed to accentuate their charms. The crisper, lighter and less aromatic in general -- e.g., an all-American lager like Budweiser -- the colder you should serve it, and in a tall straight-sided glass. (You can find a list of proper glassware at BeerAdvocate.com and a discussion of beer temperatures are RateBeer.com.)

At Engert's tastings, budding beer aficionados are taught to swirl, sniff, sip and swish the brews around their mouths, breathing back in as they swallow. That's to get what Engert and Daniels call retronasal smelling, the technical term for the aromas that you can only pick up at the back of your nose and throat.

But beyond all that facial exercise, what Engert really wants you to do is pay attention to what you're smelling and tasting and feeling. To help you parse your palate, he hands out scorecards and talks you through characteristics from beer color ("is it brick or tawny brown?"); to flavor ("is it tart and crisp?"); to characteristics of malt (toasty, caramelly) and hops (pine, oregano) to mouthfeel (silky, oily, airy, hollow).

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