

BEER MADNESS



At Birch & Barley/ChurchKey in Logan Circle, another tray of cool competitors is headed for the panelists in this year's Beer Madness blind taste-off.

ASTRID BECKEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

MORE TO POUR

A record 64 craft brews go head to head in this year's revamped, retooled taste-off

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- Meet this year's panel: five readers and five experts
- Vote on the first round of matchups
- Watch a video of Greg Engert and Greg Kitsock

INSIDE

- See the full bracket of 64 beers. E5

The gloves are off for Beer Madness, our annual taste-off to determine the nation's top brew. Last year, we went global in honor of the Olympics. This year, with a post-Prohibition record of more than 1,700 breweries operating in the United States, we doubled the field from 32 to 64 and decided to celebrate the glories of American craft brews. All 64 breweries represented meet the Brewers Association's exacting standard of "craft." They're small (even Boston Beer Co., with its 2-million-barrels-a-year output, is a guppy compared with such barracudas as Anheuser-Busch and MillerCoors). They're independent (not specialty divisions of large corporate brewers). They're traditional (no corn or rice adjuncts were used to water down these beers for the timid). By carefully rationing samples and spreading our tastings over two days, we were able to admit stronger styles that we had barred in the past out of

BY GREG KITSOCK
Special to
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BEER

64 cool competitors go for glory

BEER MADNESS FROM E1

Alcohol-wise, the contestants in this year's Beer Madness run the gamut from a 4 percent (by volume) dark mild to a 12 percent wood-aged imperial brown ale.

Extreme beers — IPAs fermented with Belgian yeasts, coffee-infused stouts, superized "imperial" versions of traditional styles — are the hot ticket in craft brewing. Excluding those beers, as we largely did in previous years, would be unrepresentative of the market, not to mention just plain ungrateful for all the work the brewers put into them.

Now that the Brickskeller (our venue for the previous four years) belongs to the ages, we moved our annual beer smackdown to Birch & Barley/ChurchKey in Logan Circle, whose 650-plus beer list is widely considered to be tops in the area.

In the shadow of that establishment's metal-sheathed draft lines, which resemble a gigantic pipe organ, we embarked on a marathon blind tasting on Feb. 28 that lasted as long as the Academy Awards had the previous evening, even without acceptance speeches and song-and-dance numbers.

Six days later, we regrouped at the upstairs beer bar to complete the job.

Greg Engert, beer director for the Neighborhood Restaurant Group (which includes Birch & Barley), has joined the event as a ringmaster of sorts, picking the

Would panelist Ellie Tupper be able to pick out her own brew?

contestants and suggesting a new method of grouping the beers to avoid mismatches. At Engert's urging, we jettisoned the usual delineation of ales and lagers (does anyone really care whether the yeast sinks to the bottom or rises to the top after it has done its job?) and substituted four flavor-driven categories:

Malt: These beers derive their sweet, breadly, biscuity, toasty and caramel flavors from the specialty grains.

Fruit and spice: Special yeasts are largely responsible for the fruity, peppery and spicy flavors found in these freewheeling Belgian-inspired brews and German-style wheat beers.

Roast: Highly kilned grains give these mahogany-to-ebony-colored brews nuances of coffee, chocolate, licorice and roast.

Hops: The bitter brewing herb dominates these beers, yielding flavors described as citrusy, piny, resin, herbal and floral.

For the first round, we tried to match up beers of identical or very similar styles to minimize palate shock: English brown ale vs. English brown ale, imperial IPA versus imperial IPA, and so on. (That is another change from previous years, in which the

matchups were purely random.) As we whittled the contenders from 64 to 32 to 16 to 8 and then down to 4, increasingly diverse beers clashed head to head, until each slot yielded a champion.

We also shook up our modus operandi for choosing tasters. Our panel of experts included five enthusiastic Joe-Sixpacks chosen from more than 300 readers who answered our call in the Food section. But we augmented them with five professionals: a sommelier, a mixologist, an executive chef, Birch & Barley's Engert and even the contract-brewer of one of the beers. I sat in as the 11th and potentially tie-breaking vote.

Naturally, all of the beers were tasted blind, with the bottles (or in a few cases, cans or tap handles) out of sight, each assigned a code to prevent the labels from influencing our judgment. (Even Engert, who made the initial picks, and I could be kept somewhat in the dark; others shuffled the order and assigned codes to keep us as blind as possible.) As usual, the tasters did not assign numerical scores. We scribbled down plenty of comments, then ultimately simply checked off the beer we found superior.

"Interesting things can happen when you conduct a blind tasting like this," noted Engert.

Indeed, Would the professed hophead choose a malty Scotch ale as her favorite brew of the contest? Would Ellie Tupper, who



PHOTOS BY ASTRID BECKEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Christina Hoffman of Arlington, one of five reader-panelists, samples a Beer Madness contender. Other panelists were food or beverage professionals; Beer columnist Greg Kitsock was the tie-breaker.

along with husband Bob contract-brews Tupper's Keller Pils, be able to pick out her own beer from among a field of hop monsters? Would the much-ballyhooed brand that took home

multiple medals from the Great American Beer Festival get eliminated in the first round?

And, most interesting, would the more aggressive, higher-alcohol beers dominate, or would

our panel show an appreciation for lighter but flavorful beers?

Keep following the brew drama unfolds.

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BEER MADNESS



Nahem Simon, assistant to the beer director at Birch & Barley/ChurchKey, reads the tasting glasses for another round.