

# Tasting Beer

from The Birmingham Beverage Company  
<http://www.alabev.com/taste.htm>

## Why taste different beers?

- To find out which beers taste good and which you would drink again, and perhaps to learn about beer and foods that taste good together.
- To learn about stylistic diversity of beer and even variances within a particular style.
- To identify the ingredients and their respective balance in the beer revealing the complexities available due to variations in recipes and procedures in the brewing art.
- You like beer.
- Variety is the spice of life.

The essential difference in well-made beers are how it tastes and this can be, sometimes, very individual. Understanding this, it is important to know the "real thing" when you taste it to put others in perspective. It should be similar to the experience of tasting Roquefort Bleu cheese or a fresh, vine picked tomato. Roquefort Blue cheese put all other blue cheeses in context, just as a fresh, vine ripened tomato puts canned or hot-house tomatoes in context.

---

## Selection of Beers

A casual tasting will usually include a variety of styles with the beers tasted in "spectral" order, lightest to darkest, comparing beers of like type and character. A professional tasting evaluates one style of beer with up to ten different examples within that style.

## Pouring the Beer

Approximately two fingers of foam at the finish of the pour is desired. Pour the beer gently into a tilted glass to determine the amount of carbonation then continue slowly or rapidly. Finish pouring with a straightening of the glass.

## Recommended Temperatures

- Pale Lagers 45 - 50°F.
- Amber & Dark Lagers 50 - 55°F.
- Pale Ales 50 - 55°F.
- Dark Ales & Stouts 55 - 60°F.

## Glassware

Some experts recommend the use of a brandy snifter because its shape provides access to the characteristics of the beer. Others recommend glassware according to the beer style being tasted. For example, a wheat beer would use the famous Weizen glasses, shaped like a bulb vase, to hold the larger head of this higher carbonated beer. Whatever is used, the glass should be clear to check the appearance of the beer. A clean beer glass is essential. The glassware should be cleaned with a good detergent that does not have an animal fat base. Oils and fats leave residues that will ruin the head. A solution of baking soda and hot water, allowing the glasses to air dry, works well.

Water is the best way to cleanse the palate but the more casual tasting may include crackers and/or food. Tasting the beers alone without food will allow the individualities of the beers tasted to better express themselves without being overpowered by the food.

---

## ***A Way To Taste Beer***

Every style of beer has its own balance of characteristics. If one wishes to taste a beer and convey this opinion to others, a common beer terminology must be employed. Although many terms can be substituted, the characteristics of appearance, aroma and taste/finish will do fine. These characteristics can each be controlled and varied according to the ingredients and procedures used in the brewing process. Understanding beer requires a basic understanding of the entire brewing process, including malting, the nature of fermentation, the earthy character of malt and the bitter quality of the hop. The most difficult aspect for many will be getting used to not serving the beer too cold. An over chilled beer will not reveal its true character. The subtleties and aroma will be hidden in a beer that is too cold. (One caveat, some beers of a certain type need to be served very cold.)

**Appearance:** You may think, "what does how the beer look like have to do with how it tastes?" A lot. Color, carbonation, and turbidity are all good indicators of the "health" of the beer and how closely it matches the style it was brewed for. Raise the glass to the light. Beer color can range from a very light greenish-yellow (straw) color as in pilsners, to the deep chocolate browns, sometimes opaque, for the stouts and porters, to the pinks and reds of the fruit flavored lambics, with almost every color in-between. Does the color fit the style? The color of beer is the result of a blend of malted grains. The length of exposure of the grain to the kilning process determines the color of the malt and the beer.

**Color:** Take note of the color of the beer. There are guidelines for the color of each style of beer, and a beer whose color falls outside those guidelines may not taste exactly as you were thinking it would.

**Carbonation:** is also an important vital sign of the health and quality of the beer. A good all-malt beer should, on average, retain half of its head for a minute and then leave "Brussels" lace on the side of the glass as the head falls.

**Turbidity:** (cloudiness) of a beer is a quick way to determine if a beer has spoiled or not. Bottle-conditioned beers should be cloudy, but if the beer has been filtered and you notice "floaties" in there, you had better dump it.

**Aroma:** When evaluating the aroma/bouquet of a beer, be careful to take your time with each sniff as your perception of smell is dulled after about four sniffs. Scent also helps deepen the taste and flavor of a beer so never drink beer straight from the bottle. The scent of beer can be broken down into three separate parts: aroma, bouquet, and odor.

Aroma is typically determined by the malt, grain, and any fermentation by-products. The aromas that originate from the malt and grain are often described as nutty, sweet, grainy, and malty. The fresh, earthy quality of malted barley combined with the bitter, apparent, antiseptic aroma of hops gives the beer its aroma or bouquet. Immediately after the pour, smell the beer in the glass to capture the volatile aromas as they are soon on their way out of the glass and the beer. Do the aromas reveal the raw ingredients of the beer or have these been muted? Is there a strong hop or faint hop smell? Is there a malt character? Is it full or light? Alcohol and yeast add to the bouquet, but to a smaller degree than malt and hops, in most beers.

**Bouquet:** Hops alone determine the bouquet of a beer. Their aroma is best noticed right after a beer has been poured as its scent dissipates quickly. Different hop varieties contribute different qualities to the bouquet, and some hops may not be appropriate for some styles. Terms used to describe the hop aroma include herbal, pine, floral, resin, and spice.

**Odor:** is reserved for the scents that are attributed to defects in the beer. A very common defect, which is not the brewer's fault, is "skunkiness." The oxidation of the beer from light infiltration will cause beer to develop a skunky odor. Other terms used to describe off-aromas are butter, sulphury, cooked-vegetable, fishy, oily, and chlorine.

**Taste:** is by far the most subjective and important factor when evaluating a beer. After tasting five or six beers your palate will become confused, so be sure to "clean" your palate with bread or crackers between different beers. Taste, like appearance and scent, can also be broken down into three categories: mouthfeel, flavor, and finish. Raise the glass to the lips and swallow enough of the beer to allow it to wash the entire tongue. Try to separate the hop taste and the malt taste. Are they well balanced for the style? Balance is the blending of all of a beer's properties - bitterness, acidity, esteriness, hoppiness, etc. The more malted barley used (in relation to the water), the more full and powerful the taste. Is the body full or thin? Beer can be dry, (lacking sugar) and with a usually strong bitter hop character, or fruity (the presence of sugar), or rich (a full taste of malt and fruit). How is the aftertaste? The aftertaste should confirm the taste. Is it clean and pleasant? You want to experience a slight degree of aftertaste. Alcohol strength has little to do with the overall quality, but alcohol does play a part in the taste of the beer. Can you taste too much of the alcohol? Feel the carbonation. Is it distracting? Yeast: There are many different strains of yeast, each with their own characteristics. Fed more maltose, yeast provides a smoother beer; more glucose and it makes a "winey" beer. Fermented slowly, the yeast also releases more "elegant" flavors; fermenting quickly, it will also make a more "winey" beer. Water: The quality of the water effects greatly the quality of the beer. Water can be hard or soft; alkaline or acidic. Each of these characteristics will effect the final beer.

**Mouthfeel:** is the perception of body in the beer and is caused by the residual proteins and dextrans in the beer. For each style, there is an appropriate amount of body to be expected. Body is generally classified as light, medium, or full. Body is how heavy or how light a beer feels in the mouth. This is a result of how much malt sugar has been converted into sugar. Full bodied beers have more residual sugar than light bodied beers.

**Flavor:** By far the most important and enjoyed element of drinking a beer is its flavor. To best taste all the flavors of a beer, make sure the liquid visits all four areas of your tongue: bitter, sour, sweet and salt. Take special notice of the orchestration of the balance between the hop bitterness and malt sweetness.

#### *Flavor as "Maltiness"*

Malt provides the yeast the food to make much of the beer flavor. This can be described as a sweetish or dryish "earthy" flavor. A heavier roasted malt will also contribute a degree of "roasted" taste to the beer. What grapes are to wine, malt is to beer.

#### *Flavor as "Hoppiness"*

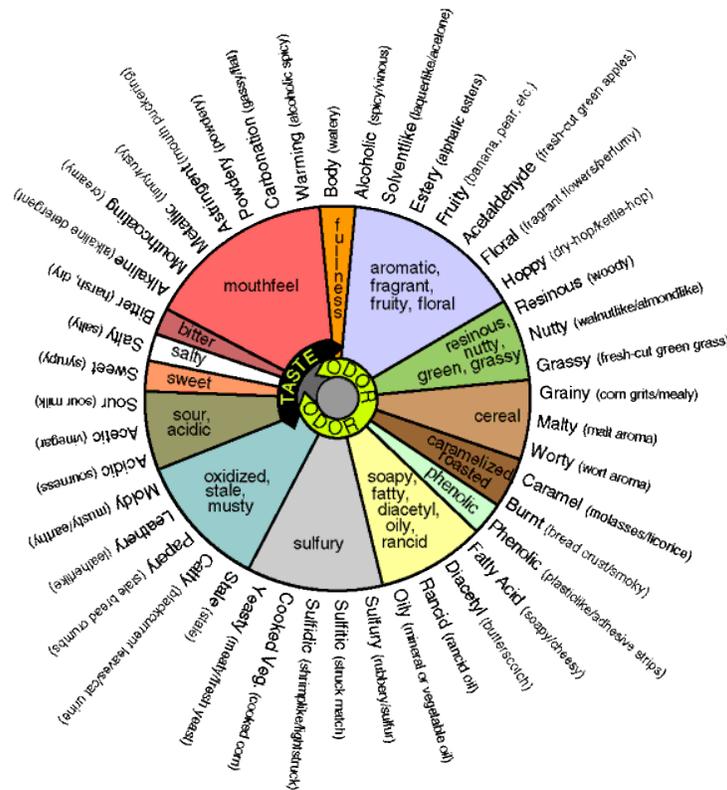
Hops provide an "herbal, crisp, bitter, palate cleansing" effect to beer. Aromatic hops provide the herbal "grassy" nose, while bittering hops provide the gentle bitterness or "bite" in beer.

**Finish:** (Also called after-taste.) The lingering sensation after a beer has been swallowed is called the finish. Again, depending on the style, a beer might have a long lingering bitter finish, or it might completely disappear without a trace.

## **Beer Flavor Wheel**

This is a narrative description of the "Beer Flavor Wheel," an attempt to list the basic taste, smell and texture descriptors found in beer in an organized way, around the circumference of a circle or "wheel," with closely related descriptors placed near each other on the wheel. For purposes of this summary, simply imagine the following list of descriptors as arranged in a circle, beginning at noon and moving

around the circle in a clockwise direction back to the top at the finish. The wheel is divided into 13 broad categories, each of which contains numerous more specific descriptors. This list may be useful in beer tasting as a way to jog your memory in identifying specific subtle elements in the beer's aroma and taste.



**1. Aromatic, Fragrant, Fruity, Floral (ODOR)**

- 0110 Alcoholic
- 0120 Solvent-like (plastic, can-liner, lacquer)
- 0130 Estery (banana, apple)
- 0140 Fruity (citrus, berry, melon, other fruits)
- 0150 Acetaldehyde
- 0160 Floral (flowers, roses, perfume, vanilla)
- 0170 Hoppy

**2. Resinous, Nutty, Green, Grassy (ODOR)**

- 0210 Resinous (sawdust, resin, cedar, pine, spruce, seasoned wood)
- 0220 Nutty (brazil nut, hazelnut, walnut, coconut, sherry-like)
- 0230 Grassy (fresh-cut grass, straw)

**3. Cereal (ODOR)**

- 0310 Grainy (raw grain, husk-like, corn, grits, flour)
- 0320 Malty
- 0330 Worty (fresh-wort aroma)

**4. Caramelized, Roasted (ODOR)**

- 0410 Caramel (caramel, toffee, treacle, molasses)
- 0420 Burnt (burnt-sugar)

**5. Phenolic (ODOR)**

- 0500 Phenolic (scorched, hospital-like, pharmaceutical, bakelite)

**6. Soapy, Fatty, Diacetyl, Oily, Rancid (ODOR)**

- 0610 Fatty Acid (tallowy, goaty, cheesy)
- 0620 Diacetyl (butter, butterscotch)
- 0630 Rancid (rancid butter)
- 0640 Oily (vegetable oil, gasoline, machine oil)

**7. Sulfury (ODOR)**

- 0700 Sulfury (rotten egg)
- 0710 Sulfitic (burnt-match, choking, burnt rubber)
- 0720 Sulfidic (sewage, natural gas)
- 0730 Cooked Veg. (overcooked greens, cooked corn)
- 0740 Yeasty (fresh yeast, meaty)

**8. Oxidized, Stale, Musty (ODOR)**

0800 Stale (old beer)  
0810 Catty (skunky)  
0820 Papery (cardboard)  
0830 Leathery  
0840 Moldy (damp cellar, wet soil)

**9. Sour, Acidic (ODOR, TASTE)**

0900 Acidic (pungent, sharp)  
0910 Acetic (vinegar)  
0920 Sour (lactic, sour milk)

**10. Sweet (ODOR, TASTE)**

1000 Sweet

**11. Salty (TASTE)**

1100 Salty

**12. Bitter (TASTE)**

1200 Bitter

**13. Mouthfeel (TASTE)**

1310 Alkaline  
1320 Mouthcoating  
Mouthfeel (TASTE, ODOR)  
1330 Metallic (coins, inky, iron, rusty water, tinny)  
1340 Astringent (mouth-puckering, tannin-like, tart)  
1350 Powdery (dusty, chalky, particulate)  
1360 Carbonation (flat undercarbonated, gassy overcarbonated)  
1370 Warming (spicy, alcoholic, winey)

**14. Fullness (TASTE, ODOR)**

1410 Body (thin, bland, full, viscous, creamy)