

How to taste beer

Beer-tasting should involve all the senses, even that of hearing the gush of good ale into a glass at the bar-top is music to a beer lover's ears. What's more, beer has a variety of aromas and tastes, all naturally produced by the actions of all the raw materials.

1. Look at the beer. It should be clear (unless it's a Weisse or witbier).
2. You can also judge a beer's condition by seeing how lively it is. A tired beer lacks sparkle. When tasting, this lack of life is all too apparent.
3. As the beer descends down the glass, a lacework-like trace of foam should remain.
4. Swirl the beer around the glass to release its aromas.
5. Note the beer's colour, which varies according to the malt used.
6. One of the great joys of a beer is its aroma. Malty aromas include dried fruit, coffee beans, biscuit, smoke, malt, Ovaltine, plain chocolate, toffee, butterscotch and caramel. Some dark beers suggest rich Christmas cake. Malt also produces dryness to the finish. Hoppy aromas are fruity, resinous, aromatic, citrusy, peppery, herbal, spicy, lemon and floral. It's possible to pick out Seville orange marmalade (sometimes even lime), tropical fruits such as lychees and passion fruit, resin (think varnish), blackcurrants and even fruit flavoured candy. With stronger beers, yeast esters add their own complexities such as tropical fruit, banana, apricot skin and a spritzy feel. Strong beers have a warming feel due to their high alcohol content.
7. Don't be afraid to stick your nose into the beer and spend time sniffing.
8. Taste the beer. Let the beer wash over your tongue and concentrate on the flavour sensations you pick up. Some beers come bearing plenty of fruity flavours, while others boast rich, malty savours. What is the essence of the beer in your mouth? Is it smooth, tingling, grainy, thin, acidic or chewy? Some beers are robust on the palate while others slip down like honey.
9. Do swallow. Unlike wine-tasting, part of beer-tasting involves letting the beer work its effect on your throat. A great beer is well-balanced, the malt and hops work together rather than overwhelm each other.
10. Consider the beer's finish. Is it bitter? Is it dry? Does it last? Does it make you want another? It should!

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