

Beer & Ale Tasting

How to Host a Beer-Tasting Party

by: Alström Bros on Wednesday -October 16, 2002 -A BeerAdvocate Exclusive

Beer is a wonderful social lubricant, and what better way to apply it than hosting your own beer tasting party! Not only are they fun, but they can be very educational and enlightening – as the world of beer often is.

Step One: What Beer To Buy?

First, who will be attending? If they are potential converts to the world of better beer, then cross them over with lighter styles, like lagers/pilsners, golden/blonde ales and perhaps finish things off with a light pale ale or even a dry Irish stout – aka “crossover” beers. Steer clear of over-the-top hoppy and high alcohol beers. The idea of a crossover beer is that it should be similar to the beer you are trying to crossover from. You want to wean them off of their current beer, or ease them into beer ... not spook them into running back to their beverage of choice. Who knows, after a few different brews they may want to try something a bit bolder.

If those attending have an adventurous palate, then just buy whatever you want. If you experience a mental block, start off by thinking of a theme which will not only make it easier to pick the beers, but it'll make your beer tasting party much more exciting. Some themes might be: “Oktoberfest” (round up as many of these fest beers as possible), “Taste of Belgium” (Belgian beers on their own, or pairing Belgian beer with cheeses and chocolates), “Big Beer Bash” (hearty, high alcohol beers), “A Winter Warmer” (winter warmers, spiced beers) or our personal favorite, “The Shit Beer Showdown” (a selection of American macro lagers) ... you get the idea.

Step Two: Handling and Storing the Beer

Handle your beer with love and kid gloves. Beer should be stored in a consistent environment, away from heat and light which could spoil your beer. Ideally you'll want to store your beer in the fridge, upright and between 45°F and 55°F.

Step Three: Serving the Beer

Temperature: Americans drink their beer too damn cold, typically at 30°F to 40°F. The coldness tends to numb the taste buds and literally masks the beer's true flavors, aromas and nuances. This is fine for most mass-produced American shit beer, which requires one to have numbed senses, but not ideal for real beer. You can break serving temperatures into three general levels: 55°F-60°F (strong beers, like barleywines, dark ales), 50°F-55°F (standard ales, like bitters, IPAs, dobbelbocks, abbey ales, lambics, stouts, etc.) and 45°F-50°F (lighter beers, like lagers, pilsners, wheat beers, milds, etc.). Usually the higher the alcohol, the higher the temperature and the lower the alcohol, the lower the temperature.

Glassware: Normally, we recommend that you always use the appropriate glassware for any given beer, or style of beer, however in the case of a tasting party it might be difficult to obtain enough glassware for everyone. So feel free to break out the wine glasses, standard pint glasses or whatever you have. Do not use plastic or paper cups.

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Step Four: Tasting the Beer

Order: Many “beer experts” suggest that beers should be tasted from lightest to darkest. This is flawed. Color has nothing to do with your “tasting a beer.” Sure, color is often an indication of what you might be in for, but for the most part and with most drinkers, it’s psychological. In our own experience you’ll want to consider two things: alcohol content and hop levels. Keep your hoppy and high alcohol beers towards the end so you don’t ruin your palate early in the tasting.

Be Vocal: Share your thoughts, describe what you’re tasting. If you have trouble finding the words, remember that beer is essentially a food, so try to identify similar food like qualities that you can use to describe the beer, such as: banana, caramel, citrus, toast, coffee, chocolate, etc. ... it’s all in beer. You get the idea.

Cleanse the Palate: It’s highly recommended that you have some water as well as bread, crackers and even popcorn on hand to cleanse the palate between beers and to help stave off inebriation. Avoid salty foods or anything that could overpower the senses – you want to clean the palate, not destroy it.

Finally, something important to note: Beer tasting is very much an individual experience, and everything about it is highly subjective. There are no beer experts, just beer drinkers with opinions.