

Enter Competitions & How to Win

by Harrison Gibbs

Luck sometimes plays a factor in scoring well in competitions. But there are certain things that any brewer can do to improve their scores and chances of bringing home a ribbon. While a good brewer can usually score well with his usual beers, to really do well you must plan ahead. This article is not for those brewers who like to brew “free form” or “anything goes.” This article is for those brewers who really want to win. For help, follow this step-by-step guide.

Step 1: Review the Style Guidelines

Each competition has its own set of guidelines, so don't use the guidelines from a different competition. Many competitions use standardized guidelines, such as from the Beer Judge Certification Program or the AHA. Some may have unusual compressed sets because of fewer entries. Club-Only Competitions usually feature one style or even sub-style. Even within a given competition, they can vary from year to year, so make sure you have the latest version. Once you have the latest version, take time to read through the descriptions carefully. Buy some commercial examples and taste them. Do you know what makes each of the flavor and aroma characteristics? Homebrew judges tend to be rather strict about style guidelines. I often wonder if some good commercial examples would score very well. An otherwise very good beer can get marked down if it doesn't exactly fit. Spend some time reading the style guidelines, and then formulate your recipe accordingly.

Step 2: Timing

All beers go peak in flavor. When that peak occurs depends on the style. Generally, the stronger the beer, the longer it takes to mature or peak. A low gravity beer such as an English bitter can reach full maturity in a month., while a strong barleywine may take over a year. If you want to enter one in this year's Dominion Cup, it may be too late for anything strong. An ale requires 2 to 4 months from the date of brewing. If you're making a lager, add another month or two. Note that time will tend to decrease hop aroma, shifting the balance toward malt aroma. Wait too long and you face oxidation and the scores that accompany it.

Step 3: Address All Scoring Issues

Homebrew competitions use a standardized scoresheet from the BJCP. Look over the various elements of judging and make sure that your recipe addresses all the topics. The judging starts with aroma even before the first sip. If you have a malty German style, the malt should be evident in the nose. Many American styles should feature a prominent hop nose. But make sure you don't have a strong hop aroma with your German Dunkel. Also pay attention to esters, diacetyl and sulfur aromas. Some of these are appropriate for certain styles.

Appearance is a small part, but it makes for a few easy points. Make sure the grain bill matches the color target for your style. A protein rest will improve clarity, especially chill haze. Don't be afraid to use some Irish moss if necessary.

Flavor is the biggest portion of your score. Keep everything authentic if possible. Stick with noble hops for German styles and British hops for English styles and calculate out the correct bitterness. Make sure your yeast matches too. Use a range of specialty malts to match the maltiness the style should have. Make sure the overall balance of flavors is correct. Almost all styles require balance.

Do not forget the beer's mouthfeel. Make sure the malt profile gives the right amount of body. If you're making a wheat beer, it should have that sticky gluten feel. Oatmeal stout should feel “big,” while an American lager should feel light on the palate. Carbonation is part of mouthfeel, so when you bottle your beer, check the appropriate level for your style.

Finally, there is overall impression. Do the judges like it? If so, you're in good shape. If not, it tends to be reflected in lower scores in aroma or flavor areas too. One question seldom raised is: Will the judge remember it? Your beer is being tasted in succession with other similar beers. The ones that stand out, that are memorable are the winners.

Step 4: Brew Cleanly

Even the best recipe won't win if you get wild yeast or sterilant in the batch. Make sure your yeast starter is working well. Make a big starter and aerate well. Make sure air stays away at any subsequent step. Oxidized beer loses points. Keep the temperature controlled to prevent ester or diacetyl flavors. Finally, don't use funny metals in your brewing setup. Cleanliness contributes substantially to overall impression, so unless you've really missed the mark at recipe formulation, just about any clean beer scores well. Liquid Yeast offers cleaner flavors. So does non-chlorinated tap water. You can brew with tap, but there are drawbacks.

Step 5: Enter!

You can't win if you don't enter. Among the upcoming competitions this spring are the Dominion Cup, the First Round for the AHA National Competition, and the Spirit of Free Beer. CASK also has regular club-only competitions. Finally, keep in mind that luck plays a certain part. Not all batches of beer come out as award winners. Be persistent. Even though one batch doesn't win, the next one could. You'll get better with time, so that you can usually pick up a ribbon at each contest. It takes a bit of practice, but eventually you can hit upon that best-of-show recipe. Finally, Good Luck! ■