

Planning a BJCP Commercial Examples Tasting Event

By Thomas Barnes

One of the best preparations you can make for preparing for the BJCP mead, cider or beer tasting exams is to taste at least one BJCP commercial example for each relevant style listed in the guidelines. But, it is more helpful, and more fun, to hold a tasting event where the organizer or the participants bring commercial examples of beverages which you can critically taste and discuss.

This guideline is based on monthly tasting sessions subsidized by the Upstate New York Homebrewers Association (Rochester, NY metro region) which I have helped to run for about 7 years now. Thanks to all my participants and fellow organizers over the years!

Planning the Event

The event organizer should find a location sufficient to hold all the participants where it is legal to serve alcohol. The venue should be suitable for judging, meaning it should be relatively quiet, odor free, adequately lit and it should have at least one readily accessible bathroom. It is possible to hold a tasting session outdoors as long as the venue is out of direct sunlight, somewhat sheltered from the elements and the weather isn't too windy or cold.

Many bars and restaurants are willing to host groups of up to about 20 people on a slow night, either for a small fee or for a guarantee of a certain amount of bar and food trade. Depending on the location, the venue might charge a small corkage fee and the laws might require a staff member to open the bottles. In some cases, access to sufficient parking or public transit might also be a factor.

To keep the relationship happy, the event organizer should talk to the management in advance, make sure that the servers are properly tipped and make sure that attendees clean up after themselves. The organizer should also bring in supplies for the tasting rather than relying too much on the venue's supplies. If tasting in a "good beer bar," the organizer might also buy pitchers, growlers or pints of beer at the bar to be served to the class. This is an excellent method of getting fresh examples of certain styles of beer, mead or cider. The organizer can also invite staff to taste some of the samples if it is appropriate for them to do so.

If planning a tasting in a private home or location, make sure that your insurance covers potential liabilities you might incur for holding a party where alcoholic beverages are served.

To keep everyone's palate's fresh, and to keep people from getting too drunk, the organizer shouldn't bring more than about a dozen different examples to the event. They should be served at proper serving temperatures or a bit warmer (but not above room temperature). Plan on bringing approximately one 12 oz. bottle, or equivalent, per 8 people. Two bottles per 8 people is better, since there is enough beer left over that participants can have a second sample of each beverage, allowing them to taste them side by side with other examples, blend examples or have a second sample after the beverage has been discussed.

In addition to the beverages to be tasted, the organizer should have the following materials available:

- cups or sample glasses - at least 2 per participant
- pitchers of water
- dump pitchers
- *Bar towel or a roll of paper towels
- BJCP Style Guidelines - or relevant sections of the guidelines for the styles being tasted.

Depending on the format and size of the class, the organizer might also wish to bring additional resources

- Beer scoresheets, Beer Checklist Scoresheets (http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Beer_checklist.pdf) and Beer Faults Lists (http://www.bjcp.org/docs/Beer_faults.pdf)
- Mead scoresheets (http://www.bjcp.org/docs/SCP_MeadScoreSheet.pdf) and Mead Faults lists (<http://www.bjcp.org/meadfaults.php>)
- Cider scoresheets (http://www.bjcp.org/docs/SCP_CiderScoreSheet.pdf) and Cider Faults lists.
- Mechanical pencils to fill out scoresheets.
- Homebrewed examples of relevant beverage styles.
- Examples of other styles or commercial examples which aren't listed in the guidelines.

A typical tasting will take 2-3 hours, with some mingling and talking afterwards. The organizer should publicize the event at least a week ahead of time, but he should emphasize that the event is a tasting and judging event, not an excuse to get drunk. This tends to weed out the party animals, or at least tells them what to expect.

Running the Event

The organizer or presenter should have the beverages and all materials ready when the class starts. If the organizer is charging a fee, he should collect money before the class begins. He should introduce each example, describe its approximate age and degree of freshness (if known) and then pass the beverage around. Participants should taste the beverage critically with a copy of the BJCP Style Guidelines in front of them. After everyone has had a chance to evaluate their sample, the presenter should encourage the participants to give feedback about the beverage.

Good questions to ask:

- What are the dominant characteristics of the beverage?
- What makes it different from other styles within the same category?
- What makes it different from other examples you've already tasted?
- How good an example is this beverage as compared to the BJCP Style Guidelines?
- Do you detect any faults in the beverage?
- How would you improve the beverage?

After the beverage has been discussed, if possible, the presenter should point out any faults which he detects. Many commercial examples suffer from some degree of oxidation and beer sold in clear or green bottles is also vulnerable to becoming lightstruck.

If he is an experienced judge, the presenter might also give a general score for the beverage. Another method of scoring the beer is for the presenter to start at 50 and count down by increments of five or ten. Participants hold up their hands when the countdown reaches the range where they would score the beverage. This is a good method of quickly getting a consensus score when the class exceeds more than a few people. If the organizer wishes to discuss the beverage in more detail, he can then ask the high scorers to explain why they liked it and the low scorers to explain why they didn't.

If the tasting session extends beyond about half a dozen commercial examples, participants are likely to become just tipsy enough that it is harder for the presenter to keep control of the class. To some extent this is good, since it means that participants are actively engaged in the class and are starting to discuss the material between themselves, but it also means that the presenter must shout, clap or rap on a glass to regain the group's attention. To help keep the group's attention focused, the presenter should try to save the best examples for last and try to pace the rate at which samples are presented to keep people from getting too drunk.

When the event is over, the organizer or presenter should remind attendees to clean up after themselves, tip their servers and be careful about traveling until they are sufficiently sober to do so.

If participants have brought in homebrewed examples of a particular style, it is best to serve the commercial examples first as a "calibration" and then judge the homebrewed examples. If a homebrew is substituting for a style of beverage the organizer wasn't able to get commercially, then it can be presented as an example of that style, as long as participants are aware of the homebrew's potential limitations.

Homebrewed beverages which don't fit into the event's format should either be tasted and judged before the event begins or after it ends.

Unless you are tasting just a few beverages and have only a few people in attendance, it is best to not try to fill out scoresheets, since this slows the session down to an unacceptable degree. If judging beer, it is quicker to use the checklist format scoresheets and discuss the beer with the brewer after the beer has been judged. The exception is that if teaching an exam prep class, the presenter should have participants fill out at least one scoresheet, as if they were judging it on the exam, at each session.

Choosing Your Beverages

The tasting event organizer should plan the beverage selection carefully. If putting together a special session, it might be necessary to buy certain styles of beer in advance and store them cold, buy beverages during out-of-town trips, buy beverages via the internet from out-of-state suppliers, or trade beer using services organized through web sites such as Beer Advocate or RateBeer.

If organizing a series of tastings, the organizer might have to plan several months in advance in order to get sufficient examples of particular styles. Store your beverages cold (ideally at near freezing temperatures) to keep them in good condition.

Even so, be aware that beer styles which rely heavily on ester or late hop character for their profile will suffer badly if kept for more than a few months.

Focus on getting a good range of commercial examples within the category or style you are presenting, which represents the full range of interpretations of the style as allowed by the BJCP Guidelines. Unless you're doing a themed event, or are presenting a style where there are very few commercial examples to be had, try to avoid presenting more than one or two products from the same producer in the same session. For example, instead of just using Chimay as examples of the Belgian Dubbel, Tripel and Strong Dark Ale styles, consider one product from Westmalle, one from Chimay and another from Affligem.

While bringing a rare commercial example as a treat is a good way to get and keep your participants' attention, be careful not to overdo it, since some commercial examples are overrated due to their rarity. Focus on getting fresh examples, rather than rarities which are likely to be in bad condition. For example, if running a session on IPA, it is far better to get a couple of bottles of a good, fresh Imperial IPA which is readily available in your market rather than spending the extra time, money and trouble to get a badly-aged bottle of Pliny the Elder via mail order.

For reasons of cost, palate fatigue and keeping the sessions focused, it is best to present no more than a dozen beers in any one session. Keep in mind that if participants bring in homebrewed examples, as they might wish to do, the actual numbers of beers served might be higher.

Using Non-BJCP Commercial Examples

Another way of getting fresh examples of certain styles of beverages is to use commercial examples which aren't listed in the BJCP Style Guidelines. If doing so, it is best to choose beverages which have won large commercial competitions such as the World Beer Cup, the Great American Beer Fest or the Great Lakes International Cider and Perry Competition. Keep in mind, however, that the guidelines used to judge some of those competitions do not correspond to the BJCP Style Guidelines.

Be wary of using beers which are highly rated on websites such as Beer Advocate or Rate Beer, since the people rating those beers are not trained judges and the criteria used to classify beers are very different from the BJCP Style Guidelines. Ratings from professional ratings organizations are also to be distrusted, since those services don't use any stylistic criteria.

Using Homebrewed Examples

A good way of getting fresh styles of certain beverages which otherwise aren't available in your market is to use homebrewed examples. But, this only works if the beverage is a very good example of the style. If substituting homebrew for commercial examples, try to get examples which have recently (i.e., within the last 2-4 weeks) won at least second place in a homebrew competition where there were at least 200 entries, and where the beverage got an average score of at least 35. Alternately, if the tasting organizer is an experienced judge and has had a chance to taste a beverage made by a skilled homebrewer, bottles of that beverage it can be substituted if the organizer objectively believes that it would get a score at least 38 in competition.

Avoid using your own brews for tasting sessions unless you have the scores to vouch for their quality. The exception is if you plan a “brewers’ roundtable” event, where participants each

bring in homebrewed beers of a particular style and the group critiques and scores each beer based on the BJCP Style Guidelines.

Finding Commercial Examples

It is often hard to find commercial examples listed in the BJCP guidelines. Especially if you’re trying to cover a variety of styles, you might be frustrated by lack availability of certain styles depending on where you reside. Most styles are quite common in many metropolitan areas but can be equally as rare in rural areas. The table below will help tasting event organizers plan their sessions, especially if they intend to teach a series of classes.

Cat	Subcat	Style	Availability	Season	Stability	Freshness
01	A	Light American Lager	Ubiquitous	All	Average	V. Good
01	B	Standard American Lager	Ubiquitous	All	Average	V. Good
01	C	Premium American Lager	Ubiquitous	All	Average	V. Good
01	D	Munich Helles	Common	All	Average	Average
01	E	Dortmunder Export	Rare	All	Average	Below Average
02	A	German Pilsner	Common	All	Poor	Below Average
02	B	Bohemian Pilsner	Rare	All	Poor	Below Average
02	C	Classic American Pilsner	Unavailable	All	Poor	Average
03	A	Vienna Lager	Rare/V. Rare	Fall-Sep	Average	Average/Poor
03	B	Oktoberfest/Märzen	Common/V. Rare	Fall-Sep	Average	Average/Poor
04	A	Dark American Lager	Common	All	Average	Below Average
04	B	Munich Dunkel	Rare	All	Average	Below Average
04	C	Schwarzbier (Black Beer)	Rare	All	Average	Below Average
05	A	Maibock/Helles Bock	Rare/V. Rare	Spring-Apr	Average	Below Average
05	B	Traditional Bock	Rare/V. Rare	Winter-Nov	V. Good	Average/Below Average
05	C	Doppelbock	Common/Rare	Winter-Nov	V. Good	Average
05	D	Eisbock	Rare/V. Rare	Winter-Feb	Excellent	Average
06	A	Cream Ale	Common/Rare	Spring-May	Poor	Average
06	B	Blonde Ale	Rare/V. Rare	Spring-May	Poor	Average
06	C	Kölsch	Common/Rare	Spring-May	V. Poor	Poor*
06	D	American Wheat or Rye	Common/Rare	Spring-May	Poor	Average
07	A	Northern German Altbier	Rare	All	Average	Below Average
07	B	California Common Beer	Common	All	Average	Average
07	C	Dusseldorf Altbier	Rare	All	Average	Below Average
08	A	Standard/Ordinary Bitter	V. Rare	All	Poor	Poor
08	B	Special/Best/Premium Bitter	Rare	All	Poor	Poor
08	C	Extra Special/Strong Bitter	Common	All	Poor	Below Average
09	A	Scottish Light 60/-	Unavailable	All	Poor	Average
09	B	Scottish Heavy 70/-	Rare	All	Poor	Average
09	C	Scottish Export 80/-	Rare	All	Poor	Average
09	D	Irish Red Ale	V. Common/V. Rare	Winter-Feb	Average	V. Good/Poor
09	E	Strong Scotch Ale	Common	All	Excellent	Below Average
10	A	American Pale Ale	Ubiquitous	All	Poor	V. Good
10	B	American Amber Ale	Common	All	Average	Average
10	C	American Brown Ale	Common	All	Average	Average
11	A	Mild	V. Rare	All	Poor	Poor*
11	B	Southern English Brown	Unavailable	All	Poor	Average
11	C	Northern English Brown Ale	V. Common	All	Average	Below Average
12	A	Brown Porter	Rare	All	Average	Below Average
12	B	Robust Porter	V. Common	All	Average	Average
12	C	Baltic Porter	Rare	All	Excellent	V. Good
13	A	Dry Stout	V. Common/Rare	Winter-Feb	Average	Average/Below Average

13	B	Sweet Stout	Common/Rare	Fall-Oct	Average	Average/Below Average
13	C	Oatmeal Stout	Common	Fall-Oct	Average	Average/Below Average
13	D	Foreign Extra Stout	Common	All	V. Good	Below Average
13	E	American Stout	Common	All	V. Good	Average
13	F	Russian Imperial Stout	Common	All	Excellent	V. Good
14	A	English IPA	Rare	All	Poor	Below Average
14	B	American IPA	V. Common	All	Poor	Average
14	C	Imperial IPA	Common	All	Poor	Average
15	A	Weizen/Weissbier	Common/Rare	Spring-Apr	V. Poor	Poor*
15	B	Dunkelweizen	Rare	All	V. Poor	Poor*
15	C	Weizenbock	Rare	All	Average	Below Average
15	D	Roggenbier	Unavailable	All	V. Poor	Poor*
16	A	Witbier	Common	Spring-May	V. Poor	Poor*
16	B	Belgian Pale Ale	Rare	All	Poor	Below Average
16	C	Saison	Rare	All	Average	Below Average
16	D	Bière de Garde	V. Rare	All	V. Good	Below Average
16	E	Belgian Specialty Ale	Rare	All	Varies	Varies
17	A	Berliner Weisse	V. Rare	All	Average	Below Average
17	B	Flanders Red Ale	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
17	C	Flanders Brown Ale/Oud Bruin	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
17	D	Straight (Unblended) Lambic	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
17	E	Gueuze	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
17	F	Fruit Lambic	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
18	A	Belgian Blond Ale	Common	All	V. Good	Average
18	B	Belgian Dubbel	Common	All	Excellent	Average
18	C	Belgian Tripel	Common	All	Excellent	Average
18	D	Belgian Golden Strong Ale	Common	All	Excellent	Average
18	E	Belgian Dark Strong Ale	Common	All	Excellent	Average
19	A	Old Ale	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
19	B	English Barleywine	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
19	C	American Barleywine	Common	Fall-Sep	Excellent	V. Good
20	A	Fruit Beer	Common/Rare	Spring-May	Poor	Average/Below Average
21	A	Spice/Herb/Vegetable Beer	Common/Rare	Summer-Aug	Average	Average/Below Average
21	B	Christmas/Winter Specialty Spiced	Common/V. Rare	Fall-Nov	Average	Average/Poor
22	A	Classic Rauchbier	V. Rare	All	Average	Below Average
22	B	Other Smoked Beer	Rare	All	Average	Below Average
22	C	Wood-Aged Beer	Rare	All	V. Good	Average
23	A	Specialty Beer	Common	All	varies	varies
24	A	Dry Mead	Rare	All	Excellent	Average
24	B	Semi-Sweet Mead	Rare	All	Excellent	Average
24	C	Sweet Mead	Rare	All	Excellent	Average
25	A	Cyser (Apple Melomel)	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
25	B	Pyment (Grape Melomel)	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
25	C	Other Fruit Melomel	Rare	All	Excellent	Average
26	A	Methglin	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
26	B	Braggot	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
26	C	Open Category Mead	V. Rare	All	Excellent	Average
27	A	Common Cider	Rare	All	Average	Average
27	B	English Cider	Rare	All	Average	Average
27	C	French Cider	V. Rare	All	Average	Average
27	D	Common Perry	V. Rare	All	Average	Average

27	E	Traditional Perry	V. Rare	All	Average	Average
28	A	New England Cider	Unavailable	All	V. Good	Average
28	B	Fruit Cider	Rare	All	Average	Average
28	C	Applewine	V. Rare	All	V. Good	Average
28	D	Other Specialty Cider/Perry	V. Rare	All	Average	Average

* Buy on draft at a good beer bar which keeps its beer in good condition and cleans its lines properly.

Key

Availability

There is a distinct American bias to the BJCP Style Guidelines, with an emphasis on products from Northeastern, Great Lakes and West Coast brewers and on imported varieties which are readily available in the United States. Additionally, since the guidelines were last updated in 2008, they don't reflect changes in product line-ups.

For these reasons, it is difficult for judges in some regions of the country to get certain commercial examples. Rankings of availability are based on my travels throughout the Northeast and Midwest and some travel throughout the Southeastern U.S. Judges outside the United States, and in more rural and conservative areas of the nation, will find it much harder to get any commercially-listed examples of certain styles. Judges in metropolitan areas, especially on the East and West coast, and especially in areas where there is a lively craft beer scene, will find it easier.

Ubiquitous: Available just about any place where alcoholic beverages are sold (e.g., convenience stores, drug stores, gas stations).

Very Common: Easily found in any store with a decent selection of alcoholic beverages (e.g., most grocery stores, state liquor stores).

Common: Usually available in any store with a decent selection of alcoholic beverages.

Rare: Hard to find. Usually available only in specialty beer stores, or in liquor stores with an extensive craft or import beer selection.

Very Rare: Limited seasonal availability or distribution. Sometimes available in specialty beer or liquor stores with an excellent craft and/or import beer selection.

Unavailable: No BJCP listed commercial examples available in North America. Must rely on homebrewed examples.

Season

Many beverages are only released on a seasonal basis. This makes it harder to plan an event featuring some styles during some times of the year. "All" means that a beverage doesn't change in availability during the year. If a beer is listed as being seasonal, the season is listed first, followed by the month when that style first appears on store shelves. Increasingly stale examples might linger for months afterwards.

Stability

Some beers age better than others. A few styles actually benefit from extended aging, although extremely aged examples aren't very good exemplars of their particular style.

Excellent: Actually benefits from extended aging if properly stored.

Very Good: If properly stored, will start showing oxidative faults within about 6-12 months of packaging.

Average: If properly stored, will start showing oxidative faults within about 3 months of packaging.

Poor: If properly stored, will start showing oxidative faults, or other problems, within about 6 weeks of packaging.

Very Poor: If properly stored, will start showing oxidative faults, or other problems, within a few weeks of packaging.

Freshness

Due to ignorance, carelessness or unscrupulous business practice, many merchants don't keep their products in peak condition. Freshness is an empirical rating of how likely commercial examples of a particular style are to be in peak condition. If two ranges are given, the first range indicates the relative freshness when the style is "in season." Seasonal beers still on store shelves after the season has ended are likely to be in very bad condition - caveat emptor.

Very Good: Chances of getting a bad bottle are very low. High turnover. Beer is usually stored cold and is usually packaged in cans or brown bottles or otherwise protected from light and heat. Locally- or regionally-produced examples are usually available. Alternately, the beverage is relatively immune to abuse at the hands of wholesalers and retailers.

Average: Chances of getting a bad bottle are low. Reasonably high turnover. Beer is sometimes stored cold and/or is often packaged in a way which protects it from light and heat. Reasonably fresh domestically-produced examples are usually available. Alternately, the beverage has some resistance to mistreatment.

Below Average: Moderate risk of getting bad bottles. Low turnover. Beer often sold in green or clear bottles. Must be imported. Somewhat vulnerable to mistreatment.

Poor: High risk of getting bad bottles. Very low turnover. Beer often sold in green or brown bottles. Must be imported. Very vulnerable to mistreatment. Worth looking for fresh homebrewed examples instead, or looking for well-kept draft examples at a good beer bar.

Planning a Series of Tastings

By combining a few categories, the nature of the BJCP Style Guidelines makes it relatively easy to cover all the styles listed in the guidelines by holding monthly tasting sessions over a two year period. This is a sample calendar which takes seasonal availability into account. Categories in bold type are fixed due to seasonal availability.

Month	Year	Categories Covered
January	1	Light Lager (Category 1)
February	1	Pilsner (Category 2)
March	1	Scottish and Irish Ales (Category 9)
April	1	Amber Hybrid Beers (Category 7)

May	1	Bock (Category 5)
June	1	Light Hybrid Beers (Category 6)
July	1	English Pale Ale (Category 8)
August	1	German Wheat and Rye Beers (Category 15)
September	1	American Ales (Category 10)
October	1	European Amber Lagers & Dark Lagers (Categories 3-4)
November	1	Ciders (Categories 27-28)
December	1	English Brown Ales (Category 11)
January	2	Porter (Category 12)
February	2	IPA (Category 14)
March	2	Sour Ales (Category 17)
April	2	Stout (Category 13)
May	2	Belgian and French Ales (Category 16)
June	2	Belgian Strong Ales (Category 18)
July	2	Strong Ales (Category 19)
August	2	Fruit Beers (Category 20)
September	2	Smoke and Wood Aged Beers (Category 22)
October	2	Specialty Beers (Category 23)
November	2	Spice, Herb & Vegetable Beers (Category 21)
December	2	Mead (Categories 24-26)