

# Best Practice for Running and Judging CAMRA Beer Competitions

This note has been put together by the CAMRA Technical Advisory Group to provide guidance on what is seen as best practice when running CAMRA beer competitions.

Running a competition is neither complicated nor difficult and the number of categories judged can be flexed to match the size of your Festival. So in the case of CBOB selection, any Festival should be able to manage some involvement in the process as long as a suitably high beer quality can be maintained.

The aim of this document is to provide practical advice and options based on the vast experience gained from running “Champion Beer Of” competitions for many years and is as applicable to large National and Regional Competitions as it is for a smaller Branch Beer of the Festival Competition. It is deliberately basic so that it can cater for everyone, from an experienced competition organiser who wants to benchmark himself to a first timer who would like some clear step-by-step guidance. There are always different ways of doing everything, and this document should not be seen as a “you must do it this way” rulebook, but rather as a way that has been proven to work over the years. If you can achieve the same ends in a different way, feel free (but please let us know, via CAMRA Central Office, so we can share your ideas and experiences).

## **Beer cellaring and preparation**

The ability to maintain the beer at cellar temperature is vital (especially during the warmer months or in warm venues) and therefore the use of some form of cooling is expected (ideally cooling systems from the warehouse in St Albans).

It is vital that the beers to be judged are given adequate cellaring time. Many of the beers may be new to you and you do not know how long they will need. Best practice should be to keep the beers under cooling for 24 hrs prior to venting, followed by at least 48 hrs after venting, but remember that stronger beers (especially barley wines) may require longer.

Speak to the Festival Organiser well in advance and ensure that you have been given access to enable adequate cellaring time. If this cannot be provided in the main hall, is there a smaller area available you can access earlier?

Green beer is the biggest complaint experienced by competition bar managers; it's also the most embarrassing when you're trying to showcase the best of your area.

The identity of the beers should not be known to the Judges prior to tasting. Measures to prevent this include not circulating any lists specifically identifying the beers in the competition and preventing the Judges from inspecting cask end labels, if this would identify the candidate beers.

A combination of these factors may require a separate stillage to be set up in a dedicated area, or if time allows the standard stillage can be used and judicious timing of sampling used to keep the competition entrants under wraps.

Check the beers well in advance of the competition. If a beer is sour or condemned, do the fair thing and withdraw it from competition. If a beer has not settled and you feel it won't settle, consider contacting the brewery, they often have good advice on settling times. Re-finishing is best avoided as if done badly this can make the situation worse.

It is your call, as the competition bar manager, to decide what should be judged and what should not. A simple criterion is to ask “is the beer fit for sale?” – if not, don't judge it.



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The room to be used for judging should have a good supply of natural light, otherwise judging colour and clarity can be very difficult. Similarly it should be free from odours and distractions. The panel must not be able to see what beer is being poured. Easy access to toilets without having to pass through a public area or by the stillage is also an advantage.

The panel table should be large enough that all the glasses required can be laid out but not too big, so that each member of the panel can converse with the other members. Cover the table with a white table cloth (so as not to distract from the colour of the beer).

Lay out a score sheet, a copy of the relevant beer style criteria, a pen and a glass for water for each judge. The table should also be supplied with jugs of water and water biscuits (to allow the judges to clear their palates between competition entrants).

It is also helpful to have a torch and a sheet of white card available, to allow judges to check the colour and clarity of darker beers.

Prepare enough glasses for the required number of beers, plus a few extras in case of additional samples being requested by the panel, and identify the beer on each glass, by a small sticker displaying the beer's code number. Preferably use a glass without a logo (copita style glasses are ideal), to make judgement of colour and clarity easier.

CBOB gives each category a number and each beer a code letter (e.g. Milds P1, Q1, R1... Bitters P2, Q2, R2 etc.). These codes can be carried forward to the final panel or the beers given new codes as you wish. Try to avoid sequences like A, B, C or 1, 2, 3 to prevent any subconscious selection based on A's or 1's being better than the others.

## **Panel make-up**

Judging panels should be made up of between 6 – 8 judges. Whilst there is no need to have an odd number or a casting vote, in certain circumstances it can be useful. In the very rare event of a tie, some organisers award joint prizes or use a criterion such as taste to decide on the winner.

Champion Beer of Britain (CBOB) is a good model of how to maximise the benefits of a panel. Typically panels contain 6 judges (2 trained tasters, 2 judges from the trade (food, pubs or breweries) and 2 public or media figures). This gives a good spread of technical knowledge, experience and a media focus (someone to be the focus of, or prepare, an article for newspaper, radio or television). You may wish to have a spare judge or two up your sleeve in case of "no shows" (CAMRA members are ideal for this as they will be around at the festival but can get on with things if not required).

The two CAMRA trained tasters act as Chair and Vice-chair (see later).

Competitions can be run in different ways:

For example, Champion Beer of Scotland is simply a taste-off between the best 6 – 8 beers in Scotland that year, irrespective of style. Champion Beer of Britain uses the beer styles model where beers of a particular style are judged against each other before forming a final mixed panel of the winners of each style. This is particularly useful to promote rare beer styles.

A panel should have up to 10 beers to taste, ideally around 6. If you have in excess of 10 beers to judge in a category, it will be necessary to have multiple category panels.



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Two examples of models for this are: Model 1 where two panels cover beers from the same category and the top beer from each panel move to the final table and Model 2 where the top 2 or 3 beers from each initial panel move to an intermediate panel to pick a winner to move forward.

It is vital that you don't directly compare the results of two separate panels to get a result. Panels will score the beer very differently, even to achieve the same placing. Placing is key, not the absolute score.

Beware of using the same panel to judge more than one category. If doing this the total number of beers tasted should be no more than the number above and the weaker gravity and/or flavoured category should be tasted first.

## **Running the Competition on the day**

Judges invariably arrive late, so ensure that you invite them to arrive in plenty of time. Ideally organise the judging for mid to late morning, so that people's taste buds are fresh and not distracted by any strong tasting lunch.

It is useful, but not vital, to have name badges (indicating name and who they are); this often helps break the ice.

The Panel Chair should introduce all the judges to each other and once assembled get them seated at the panel table.

The panel should be served a "thirst-quencher" to take the edge off their palate, this should not be a beer that they will taste on their panel and ideally will be an easy-drinking ale of low gravity.

Present the beers in order of strength (both gravity and flavour).

A server should be available to each panel. The Chair should advise the server to get the next round in adequate time, to allow for the beer to be poured and transported from the cellar to the judging area just as the panel is ready.

Pour the beer into half-pint glasses. Fill the beer glass no more than ½ full to allow room for easy appreciation of the beer's condition and aroma.

If the panel is a mixed category panel the waiter should indicate to the panel the style of the beer to be judged.

All beers should be dispensed in the same way (preferably by gravity), this minimises the effect of variations in serving on the impression gained by the judges.

Ask if the panel would like previous beers to be left on the table (many do to allow comparative tasting as the judging progresses).

At the end ask if the panel would like to review any specific beers and supply fresh glasses as requested.

## **Guidance for Panel Chairs**

This is available as a separate document.



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## **Scoring**

Category Panels:

At the category panel stage beers are scored on how good they are as an example against their category style. Note: keep the scoring simple e.g. no decimals or fractions.

Mixed or final panels:

Mixed or final panels should still check a beer against style even if it has gone through a category heat. Mistakes do occur and some category heat winners will match their style better than others, but hopefully the hard work will have been done so this should only need to be a cursory check.

Once the beer is confirmed as being in style, the beer should be scored on the basis of how good it inherently is. Look for beers that work as a whole. Does the taste live up to the aroma? Are you left with a satisfying aftertaste? Rare beer styles and strong ales should not be discriminated against if they are seen as “unmarketable” by certain judges or because they aren’t quaffable. It’s the quality of the beer that counts.

For example:

How well does it drink, does a bitter have the ability to quench and the drinkability for a session ale? Is a Barley Wine an end of the night treat beside a roaring fire? Look for identity and a beer that is outstanding in its class. Ask your self is it the beer worthy of the title being offered?

## **Potential pitfalls**

Where there are two or more panels for a category beware of comparing the scores of one panel against another. The numbers are not absolutes and simply a reflection of the comparison of beers within a panel. If you need a winner then you really need to compare the winners of the two panels in a head-to-head taste off.

Often there might be a number of beers from one category on a final panel. It has happened that a final panel has reversed the order of the beers compared to the category panel (i.e. they prefer the runner up to the category winner). Be prepared for this – you have accepted in the process that this may occur, and that the beers submitted are close in standard.

## **Post judging**

If the final panel overlaps with any category panels, ensure that the judges cannot mix whilst the scores are being tallied, preferably by entertaining them in separate rooms. Panel members always like to find out the beers they have tasted. Feel free to do this but always ask them to be discreet until after the announcement of the results. It is normal practice to make sure that there is some post-judging food and hospitality available for the judges.

