Introduction to Beer Evaluation

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Introduction

Beer Evaluation is a complex topic to cover in a single article. Therefore, what is included below is only a summarization of what to look for when appraising a beer. In subsequent months, a breakdown of each category will be provided with in depth descriptions.

Tasting beer starts with understanding the primary categories of sensory analysis and these are: Aroma, Appearance, Flavor, and Mouthfeel. In competition, judges will also have an "overall" category to summarize their findings, but let's just stick with these four. In addition to this, several things should be considered when evaluating a beer such as glassware, temperature, style guidelines, tasting order, etc. One must have also an in depth knowledge of the "lingo" used when described beer, as well as fermentation off-flavors.

Let's start with the four categories of sensory analysis.

Sensory Variables - AAFM

Aroma

The aroma is a distinct characteristic in a beer. It can dictate hop presence, different uses of malt, and fermentation byproducts that make a beer style unique. It can also define off-flavors possibly due to infection or faulty fermentation. There are common terms used to describe different aromatics in beer and while these are far too comprehensive to describe in this article, here are some relevant examples. Cascade, a common hop used in IPAs, tends to have a distinct citrus and grapefruit aroma. Belgian Special B malt tends to carry a bready, dark fruit aroma. Belgian beer styles often have peppery, fruity, and clove-like aromas due to the yeast fermentation.

Beer Example: Corona, a beer hopefully everyone knows, carries a grainy-sweet aroma that stems from the use of the adjunct corn combined with malted barley. Corona also has a skunky aroma due the reaction of sunlight with hop compounds in the beer.

Appearance

When evaluation the appearance of a beer, it is important to look at color, clarity, head color and retention. Beer color can be described using adjectives such as amber, yellow-gold, and dark brown, however most beer aficionados also compare it to a standard color scale used in the brewing industry called the Standard Reference Method (SRM) – see below:

SRM Beer Color Chart

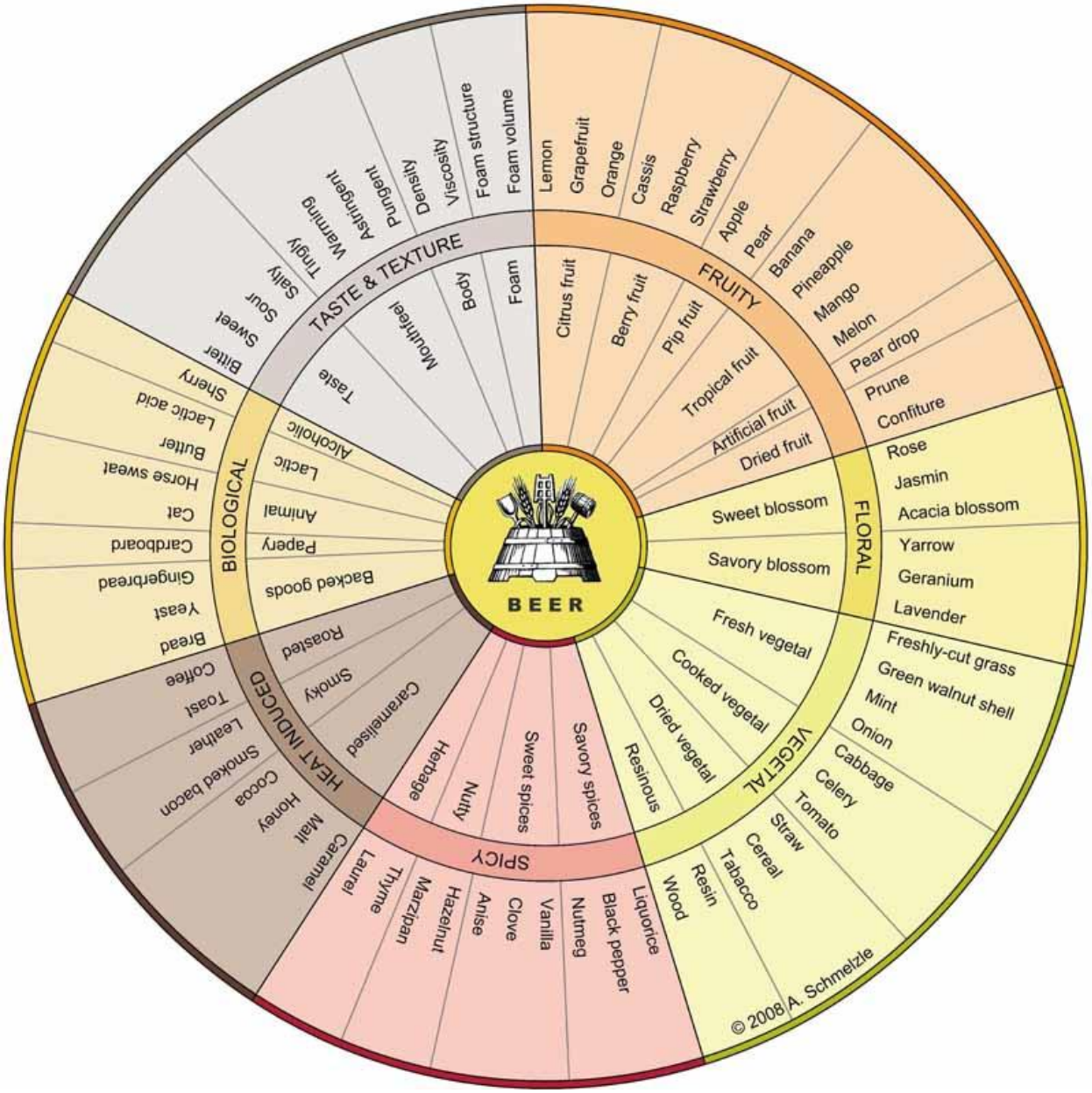
# Value	Color	Beer Style
2		light lager
3		pilsner
4		hefeweizen
6		american pale ale
7		gueze
10		extra special bitter
13		enlish strong ale
17		red ale
22		dunkel
24		porter
30		stout
38+		imperial stout

Certain styles carry different SRM values. For example, American Stouts tend to have an SRM range of 30-40. Referencing the chart above, they tend to be dark brown to almost black in color. Clarity is usually defined by how well you can see through the beer and certain styles are defined by their clarity such as the brilliant clarity the German Pilsner or American Premium Lager. Clarity can also demonstrate problems with fermentation if a beer that is supposed to be clear and is not. Head color and retention (the amount of foam on top of the beer and how long it lasts) are also important. Belgian beers tend to have a rocky, thick, long-lasting white foam top from the use of proteinaceous malts. In fact, beers that have increased protein content such as wheat beers typically have more head retention as the proteins literally tend to carry carbon dioxide to the top of the beer.

Flavor

Flavor is a diverse category of beer evaluation and as with aroma, items like fermentation, use of various malts and hops, as well as off-flavors, can affect it. When appraising the flavor of beer we are usually looking at the flavor of hops, malts, fermentation byproducts, as well as overall maltiness and bitterness of the beer. Beer styles can be identified often by their flavor, especially

those of European origin. For example, Belgian style beers often carry yeast characteristics that resemble various spices and fruits. Belgian tripels can have spicy, peppery flavor as well as notes of citrus that the yeast generate as fermentation byproducts. Below is a flavor wheel to give you a better idea of the many descriptors that can be used to describe a beer. Despite its complexity, this is by no means complete.



Beer Example: Going back to the Corona – this beer's flavor is similar to its aroma. It has mild maltiness reminiscent of sweet grains and corn. It has mild bitterness to counteract the grainy-sweet flavor of the malt and adjuncts. There is no significant hop flavor to this beer.

Mouthfeel

The mouthfeel of a beer usually describes the body of the beer, carbonation level, texture, and occasionally other descriptors such as warmth from the presence of alcohol. Returning back to the idea of styles being dictated by their flavor, aroma, and appearance, mouthfeel separates style as well. For instance, an Imperial Stout tends to have a full-body, almost slick or velvety mouthfeel. Wheat beers tend to carry more carbonation which adds to the dryness of their finish and the tart bite of the wheat. Belgian Dark Strong ales tend to have an array of fusel alcohols that will give various flavors but also a pleasant warming sensation when drank.

Beer Example: Now return to the Corona. Corona tends to have a light body, moderate carbonation often yielding slight carbonic bite. This beer is simple. It does not have warmth from complex alcohols. It does not carry a defining texture.

Summary

To see examples of these, go check out beeradvocate.com. Often times, individuals will post ratings on beers using these sensory categories. As stated above, this is by no means a complete description of these categories as they are vast and complex. Hopefully it helps to lay the framework for the next time you try a beer!