

Beer

Henry M. Halff

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Best Speaker Award

Mr. Toastmaster, ladies and gentlemen, In the spring of 1970, I was doing a post-doc at the University of Michigan when a friend of mine showed up in Ann Arbor for a very high-class conference. Our talk, as it was wont to do, turned to the subject of beer, and he made the foolish claim that he could tell the difference between Coors, then considered a premium beer, and Strohs, an unremarkable local product. I challenged him to a blind taste test, and he accepted. And I made sure that all of our most trusted friends and respected colleagues for present for the event. And he drank the samples that I had prepared, identified them with complete confidence and then melted in embarrassment and humiliation into a small grease spot on my living room floor when I announced that his performance was slightly below chance.

Don't let this happen to you! Know your beers!

Beer, like most of the stuff we put in our mouths, tastes like what goes into it. Most of the swill sold as beer in this country is made with rice and sugar, which is why Coors tastes just like Strohs, which tastes just like Michelob, which tastes just like water and nothing like honest beer.

Four things go into honest beer: water, barley (not rice), yeast, and hops. To make beer you malt the barely and mix it up with the yeast and the water. The yeast eats the malt and from it makes carbs, alcohol and bubbles. It drinks the alcohol and eventually dies of alcohol poisoning. Keep this in mind when you drink beer. This process makes the beer fizzy, and gives it the taste of the yeast and malt and the psychophysiological properties of alcohol.

Which brings us to the two main types of beer: ales and lagers. Lagers, mainly associated with Germany, are bottom-fermented, that is fermented with the yeast at the bottom of the vat, at cold temperatures. Beer made in this way is light in taste, color, and alcohol. It also has very tiny Champagne-like bubbles. The best of lagers are called pilsners because they are made using a recipe invented in the Czech city of Pilsen. Unfortunately, the worst lagers are also called pilsners, purely for marketing reasons.

Ales are fermented at warmer temperatures with the yeast and barley at the top of the barrel. The result is a stronger, darker, and somewhat heavier beer. The British are known as consummate brewers of fine ales.

The most serious beer nation is not Germany, the Czech Republic, or England. It's Belgium, the land of some 700 different beers. Some of their beers, called lambics, are made with wild yeast that impart a special flavor. Others are made with wheat, and this gives them an astringent crispness perfect for a hot Summer afternoon. Some are jacked up to remarkably high alcohol levels, infused with fruit, aged for two or three years and drunk as an after-dinner drink. Aging, by the way is not something that improves the average beer. Most beers are best drunk fresh.

Malt, or malted barley is barley that's been allowed to sprout and sweeten up a bit, and then roasted. Most of you have probably tasted, heard of or seen dark beer. Beer is made darker by roasting the barley more. Roast it a little bit, you get a pale beer. Roast it more, you get Shiner Bock (a very good beer, by the way). Roast it even more, and you get a stout, almost black in color, with deep sweet flavors of coffee or chocolate.

The one ingredient I haven't talked about is my favorite, hops. Hops are a grain that is mixed in with the beer as a flavoring agent, preservative, and, incidentally, a soporific. The predominant flavor of hops is bitterness. Brewers let the hops sit in the beer for specific periods of time. The longer the sit, the hoppier or more bitter the beer. The hoppier the beer, the more I like it.

So, if you've been paying attention, I'll bet that you, unlike my former friend, now a grease spot, can identify these three carefully selected beers, which I've arranged for tasting purposes: an India Pale Ale, strong, and hopped to beat Hell, the original pilsner, Pilsner Urquell, and Samuel Smith's Imperial Russian Stout.

Enjoy the beer!