



TALKING TO BEER DRINKERS:

Do craft beer consumers understand beer-geek speak?

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Background

The New York craft brewery industry is a vital and growing part of the New York economy, producing more than a million barrels of beer annually. Brewery tasting rooms allow producers to communicate directly with consumers, but how effective are those communications? Brewers and beer experts often use technical terms or jargon to provide accurate and precise information, which may confuse consumers with less experience or interest. Since brewery visitors are likely to have a wide range of expertise with sensory terms and beer consumption, they may use different words to describe the same beer, or may understand the same word differently as their experience grows. When a description of a beer conflicts with a consumer's perception, they may be frustrated or confused, making them less likely to purchase beer or return to the tasting room. To help brewery personnel ensure a fun and mutually beneficial tasting experience, the Cornell Enology Extension Lab recently studied how consumers with different levels of expertise describe and discuss the sensory characteristics of craft beer.

Objectives

1. To understand beer descriptor use by consumers of differing expertise.
2. To determine whether specific beer descriptors are viewed positively or negatively by consumers.

Table 1. Panelist demographics of three beer consumer focus groups

	BEGINNERS	INTERMEDIATES	EXPERTS
Gender	4 Women 2 Men	2 Women 4 Men	2 Women 4 Men
Age group	6 aged 21-36	4 aged 21-36 2 aged 49-67	3 aged 21-36 2 aged 37-48 1 aged 49-69 1 unknown
Race/ Ethnicity	1 Asian Indian 1 Native American/Native Alaskan 1 Korean 2 Non-Hispanic White 1 No response	6 Non-Hispanic White	1 Vietnamese 1 Puerto Rican 3 Non-Hispanic White 1 No response
Additional	Primarily Cornell students	Included home-brewers	5 panelists had 10+ years of experience

Experimental Design

Consumer members of Cornell Sensory Evaluation Center's Alcoholic Beverage Consumer Panel were asked to answer a series of screening questions to judge their familiarity with craft beers and their general consumption patterns. Respondents were separated into three focus groups--Beginners, Intermediates,



and Experts--based on their previous experience with beer and beer making, previous knowledge of sensory evaluation methods, and adherence to trends associated with greater beer experience (**Table 1.**) Members of each group were asked to attend a 90-minute session at the Sensory Evaluation Center, where they tasted three New York craft beers (**Table 2**), served blind in standard glasses labeled with 3-digit random numbers. Panelists used their own language to describe the beer in five sensory categories: visual appearance, mouthfeel, taste and aroma, and abstract qualities. After evaluating the beers individually, panelists participated in a guided discussion of their impressions of each beer's sensory characteristics, and the terms they would use to talk about beer in general.

Table 2. NY craft beer samples used in beer sensory descriptors focus groups

BREWERY	LOCATION	BEER	%ABV ¹	PRODUCER DESCRIPTORS ²	PACKAGING
Knucklehead Craft Brewing	Rochester	Ehret's Amber Ale	5.8	Malty sweetness, moderate caramel flavor	32 oz growler
Resurgence Brewing Company	Buffalo	Amber Lager	4.4	Biscuit, toffee, caramel	32 oz crowler
Fairport Brewing Company	Fairport	Raider's Red	4.8	Balanced, malt-accentuated, not-too-sweet	22 oz bottle w/crown cap

¹ Alcohol by volume

² All descriptors drawn from producer webpages, accessed 10/12/2017

Results

At all expertise levels the terms 'balanced,' 'rich,' 'citrus,' and 'local' were considered indicators of quality beer. Other quality indicators were shared by two of the three expertise levels, including 'hoppy,' 'floral,' and 'jalapeño,' for beginner and expert groups, and 'pairs with food' for beginner and intermediate groups. Descriptors with a universally negative connotation included 'low calorie' and all descriptors that panelists associated with the concept of a beer being 'too sweet' (**Table 3**). The beginner and expert groups also indicated that 'banana' and 'bitterness' were negative signals, as was 'sour' for the beginner and intermediate groups. 'Bitterness' and 'sour,' however, were considered acceptable when stylistically appropriate to the beer type.

The use of descriptors associated with the 'too sweet' concept proved to be case- and concentration-dependent. Panelists at all levels of expertise indicated that these characteristics were not inherently bad, but would contribute to overall like or dislike depending on other sensory aspects of an individual beer. If a product was otherwise deemed to be high-quality with a 'grown-up' marketing style, moderate levels of flavors like 'chocolate' were considered to be positive. Such beers were not described as 'sweet' in and of themselves, but included 'sweet' descriptors as part of a complex, integrated flavor profile. These descriptors denoted undesirable sensory characteristics when

Table 3. Descriptors associated with the negative 'too sweet' concept

- Peanut butter
- Raspberry
- Blueberry
- Pumpkin
- Coconut
- Maple
- Caramel
- Chocolate
- Marshmallow
- S'more



associated with other suggestive words like ‘rich,’ ‘heavy,’ and ‘dried fruit,’ and when paired with over-the-top or cartoonish marketing perceived as appealing to younger or less sophisticated consumers.

While much of the descriptive language used was the same across groups, there were unique terms at each expertise level (**Table 4**). Beginners used the widest variety of terms, with little technical language. Intermediate consumers used terms associated with specific ingredients, like ‘malty,’ and expressed the most interest in beers being true-to-type (i.e., an accurate representation of a specific brewing style.) Experts used the most technical language, but still preferred straightforward descriptions of sensory characteristics and production methods.

Table 4. Unique beer sensory descriptors used by focus groups with different levels of expertise

	BEGINNERS	INTERMEDIATES	EXPERTS
Visual Appearance	Caramel Cloudy Deep color Sparkly Amber	Amber Copper Dark Clear Reddish	Jewel tone Pale brown Clarity Filtered Cloudy
Mouthfeel	Medium-bodied Thick Tingly carbonation	Medium Mellow bubbles Thick Clean finish	Thick, creamy, lasting Head Heavy
Taste and Aroma	Hint of toffee Nutty Caramel Hoppy Aromatic Savory Earthy/Rustic Sourdough pretzel Citrusy	Subtle hops Malty Vanilla Subtle fruit Coffee/Espresso Roasted Cream Spicy Piney	Malty Grain/Barley/Wheat Fruity Bitter Roasted Hoppy Sour
Abstract Qualities	Balanced Rich Festive Satisfying No-fuss Drinkable Refined	Classy Warming Refreshing Harvest Autumn Northwestern	Not monotonic Unique sour Distinctive Appropriate to style Not pretentious

How to use this information

Customers with a range of expertise and interest will visit your tasting room, and describing your beer in ways that resonate is the best way to keep them loyal and engaged. Our study suggests that all consumers are interested in knowing the intended style, %ABV, and level of sweetness when they are choosing a beer, and that they value straightforward descriptions, without distracting errors or flowery language.



We recommend writing beer descriptions with short, common words like ‘roasted,’ ‘toasty,’ ‘malty,’ ‘fruity,’ ‘bitter,’ ‘citrus,’ and ‘piney,’ and avoiding wordy creative writing, at least on your tasting sheet. Tasting room staff can always provide additional information in conversation, which also helps develop the customer-server rapport that has been found to increase consumer satisfaction (and often sales.)

If you start by providing these basic parameters and some simple descriptors, you can then tailor the tasting room experience for consumers at different levels of expertise. We found that beginners used a wide variety of common words to describe their sensory experience of beer, often using language that may sound naive to beer experts. Beginners also rated the terms associated with ‘too sweet’ (**Table 3**) negatively. If you use these descriptors, be sure to also communicate the overall sweetness of the beer to avoid confusion. In general, beginners are interested in new beer experiences, but like to stick to familiar brands, so provide very clear information about style, ABV, and flavor characteristics to retain their trust.

Consumers with intermediate experience in craft beer are more focused on ingredients, so questions about hops or malt type are your clue to provide more abstract descriptions and processing details. You can also engage them in conversation about brewing styles, as this group was most interested in how true-to-type a beer is. These consumers are also interested in clean labeling and potential allergens, so be ready to answer questions about formula and additives.

Expert consumers are probably the easiest to spot; they’re enthusiasts who have learned the lingo, so they use technical language and jargon similar to that used in the brewing industry. Treat them like peers conversant in beer styles, techniques, and tasting terms. They’ll also be interested in recommendations for food and beer pairings.

Overall, your role in the tasting room is to provide consumers with the information they want about your beer, in terms that they can understand. Start with a tasting sheet that provides objective information (like %ABV and style) and a short sensory description in simple, common words. Then use the clues above to gauge the expertise of your consumers, shaping their experience with additional descriptions, processing details, or food pairings. Incorporating language that makes customers comfortable helps optimize their choice and, subsequently, increases loyalty and repeat sales.

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About

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Empire State Development Craft Brewing: <https://esd.ny.gov/industries/craft-beverage>

Cornell Sensory Evaluation Center: <http://blogs.cornell.edu/sensoryevaluationcenter/>

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