

With a number of people saying they wish to host Brewers Guild tastings I've been asked to write up a few notes on how we conduct the tastings at Canterbury Faire.

For these we have a moderator/chairperson and a secretary. You may also want designated pourers, but I feel it's better to have the brewer pour their own brew as they know best how it will behave.

Before the event we print up several sheets of paper with the various categories on them. These categories are based mainly on what has been presented in past years. Some categories get a lot of entries, some few or none but it changes from year to year. Currently we are using:

Fermented soft drinks/ Smalls.

Ales and Beers.

Wines and Ciders.

Meads and Melomels.

Liqueurs and Spirits. (In New Zealand it's legal to distil, unlike Australia)

At the tasting the sheets of paper are placed on the table and the entrants put a bottle of their brew in to which ever category applies. The idea being that we will work through the drinks in the order from weakest to strongest, lightest to darkest so as not to ruin our palettes. In previous years we've let brewers put in as many entries as they like, but our last meeting had around 20 brews, over 30 people and took two hours to complete so we may have to limit that to one brew per person in future.

The chairperson picks the lightest brew from the first category, and has the brewer identify themselves. The brewer then gets a couple of minutes to briefly describe the brew, how it was made, where the recipe is from, what ingredients were used, what the brewer would do differently next time, etc. They may do this whilst pouring if the group is small enough that everyone can hear.

Pouring sizes are just small tastes (we use disposable plastic tasting glasses or the pewter Guild cups) Anything left in the bottle after everyone has a taste goes back on the table so the tasters can go back for seconds later, if they wish to.

Tasters then try the drink and make comments or ask questions. When everyone has tried it and there are no more questions the chairman calls for a vote. It should be emphasised at the beginning that all votes are PERSONAL OPINION ONLY. If we are to improve our brewing then we need honest feedback but peoples tastes vary wildly and what one person likes another will hate. Were we doing competitive judging there would be a bunch of criteria and a score sheet, but we're not, we are just tasting each others brews and giving some simple feedback.

Voting is done by:

Thumbs up – This is a “Yes I like this, would drink again” vote.

Flat hand – This can mean a wide variety of things, for example “Probably technically good, but not my thing” or “Don't really like it now but seems like it might age well” to “Doesn't go well with that cheese I just had” etc.

Thumbs down – This means “No thanks” or “Not my cup of tea” and can be for any number of reasons. It might be a bad brew or might just be something the taster doesn't personally like.

The secretary quickly counts the votes (sometimes with an assistant double checking) and notes down how many of each vote the brew got and the chairman moves on to the next brew.

For these tastings everyone present votes, which does mean the number of voters some times changes as people come and go, but since we aren't taking it all that seriously it doesn't really matter too much.

When we first did this I was concerned about how voting in public would go down and whether we should make it anonymous, but the public and open voting has shown that it's perfectly okay to have your own opinion and to express that. A negative vote is not a comment against a person, it's just an expression of your own personal tastes, and that's fine. If anything I think the public nature of the voting has boosted peoples confidence. It's given us all a good sense of "you can't please everyone and don't have too" and shown that even the best brewers sometime brew junk whilst brand new brewers can make good stuff. Some of the most fun and best laughs are when someone has produced something really awful and we all get to see each others reactions too it. Also anonymous feedback is far less valuable than identified feedback. Knowing that it was the person who hates hoppy beers, or who prefers wine who didn't like your brew gives their vote a context it wouldn't have if voting was anonymous.

Once a category has been finished the secretary tallies up the votes and a winner for that category is declared, and sometimes awarded a token of some sort. The chairman then moves on to the next category. When all the brews have been tasted and all the votes tallied a winner is chosen, being the brewer who got the most votes over all, who won the most categories, made the brew that got no negative votes or whatever seems most fair. The main thing is that we try not to get too serious about it all. We are hobbieists not professional brewers so having a "winner" at all is just a bit of light hearted back patting. The "winner" is formally announced at closing court and awarded the Canterbury Faire Tasting prize, which is a beautifully crafted oak mash paddle. They are asked to use the paddle in brewing and bring it back to be re-awarded the following year.

The formal part of the tasting over tasters may then go back for seconds, thirds, fourths etc.