

## **CAMRA Tasting Panels**

Since 1989 CAMRA has operated Tasting Panels across the UK: currently there are seventy-eight Tasting Panels. They were set up to boost the public image of real ale by setting a common tasting standard, and to publish independent flavour assessments for real ales. CAMRA's tasting panels are local groups of tasting-trained CAMRA members who conduct and record tastings of their locally-brewed beers, both individually and in groups.

But what do they do, and how can I get involved?

### **What do Tasting Panels do?**

Primarily panels have responsibilities to taste and monitor beers from breweries under their domain. For instance, the Cheltenham panel covers Ashton, Battledown, Brewhouse & Kitchen (Cheltenham) & Cotswold Lion. Additionally, by request, Cheltenham covers Tewkesbury's Inferno and North Cotswold's Donnington & Goff's breweries.

Their responsibilities are:

- To taste each beer and allocate it to one of CAMRA's 23 beer styles, using the CAMRA style guide and flow charts. This is purely for beer judging purposes. For instance all CAMRA IPAs have a minimum strength of 5.5% ABV. This does not prevent a brewer from naming a beer as an IPA, whatever its strength. A good example is Greene King IPA, which is just 3.6% ABV, so **for CAMRA purposes only** it is classed as a Session Bitter.
- To create a taste profile for each beer, we complete a Tasting Card. Scores out of ten are recorded for intensity levels of a series of flavour attributes in aroma, taste and aftertaste, and an 'Overall Score for CBoB' (Champion Beer of Britain), which is a combined score for overall impression and fit to style. All assessments are impartial, setting aside any personal preferences for particular beer styles.
- Tasting Panel Chairs write tasting notes, based on the notes from panel members, and enter them on the Brewery Information System (BIS). These provide the tasting notes in the breweries section of the GBG and more detailed 'online notes', available for any CAMRA purpose including support for beer festivals. Lists of beers with their designated styles and tasting notes can be downloaded, to help organisers to choose beers to stock and publish notes in festival programmes.
- To check for any changes in beer character. This can be passed to the BLO (Brewery Liaison Officer) to check for recipe changes with the brewery.
- At the end of each tasting year (mid-October), Area CBoB Coordinators receive nominations from Tasting Panels of their beers with the highest average 'Overall Score for CBoB' in each category. Panel nominations carry more weight than CAMRA members, as panels are CAMRA tasting-trained.

Panel members complete tastings cards individually, whenever opportunities occur, or in panel meetings. Panels also meet periodically for training, group tastings and standardisation sessions.

### **How can I get involved in tasting panels?**

Tasting is fun. But we need enough capable and willing volunteers. New volunteers can be registered as members of their local Tasting Panel when they have completed Tasting Panel training. Any CAMRA member, with adequate tasting abilities, is eligible. Everyone's palate is different and therefore each Panel needs a wide range of participants. Training helps identify flavours and aromas present in beer.

Training a member to become a fully qualified taster falls into two stages:

### **1. Sensitivity to tastes**

This concerns checking the member's sensitivity to basic tongue tastes (sweet, sour, salt and bitter) and the ability to recognise a range of flavours in beer, including types of malts and hops. A kit of flavour essences is used to familiarise tasters with desirable flavours and off-flavours spiked into beer or water. Optionally, this stage may also include tests of detection of dilution to appreciate concentration of flavours, and blind tastings of beers to make the trainees think about what they are tasting and how it relates to what they would expect from those beers.

### **2. Training in CAMRA's Tasting Panels system**

A national tasting training coordinator organises a range of face-to-face and online training. The hierarchy is 'Beer Appreciation', 'Tasting Panel Training', and 'Beer Judging'. Beer judging is for experienced tasters who wish to progress to judging at national level beer competitions.

A number of accredited tasting trainers across the regions have received train-the-trainer training and can deliver the 'Tasting Panel Training' and, in some cases, the other national courses.

This includes familiarisation with the 23 beer styles into which all real ales are placed by CAMRA, and awareness of the BIS website and its facilities for tasting panel members. Trainees also learn how to conduct systematic tastings of beers and record them using the online tasting card website and the equivalent paper tasting card. The session finishes with practical profiling of several beers under the supervision of the trainer.

### **What puts people off getting trained?**

1. I don't have a good enough palate.
  - Everyone's palate is different.
  - Very few people can't taste, they are just sensitive to some tastes and blind to others.
2. I'm afraid of getting it wrong!
  - So does everyone at first. It just takes practice.
  - Sitting with experienced panel members helps to develop confidence.
3. I don't know the words to use.
  - You will learn in training, and by experience.
  - Practice. When drinking a beer write notes and then look up the tasting notes in the Good Beer Guide for comparison.

Get yourself trained. Practise and practise; your palate will become more sophisticated over time and you'll be able to pick out more flavours and identify them.

So get involved. It's fun and who doesn't like drinking beer!

If you are interested in taking the first step please contact the Regional Tasting Panel Coordinator, who will refer you to the appropriate Tasting Panel Chair, depending on your branch membership area – locally the South West (North) Regional Tasting Panel Coordinator is Andy Coston.

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