

Judging at the International Beer Challenge – 2011

By Leigh Norwood from Favourite Beers

An Invitation Arrives

I had a pleasant surprise back in April when I received an email inviting me to be a judge at the 2011 International Beer Challenge (IBC) – to be held in London in late June. For a moment I wondered how on earth I had managed to get selected but then I noticed that the Chairman of judges was none other than ‘Jeff Evans’ who had hosted the excellent tutored beer tasting evening at Favourite Beers back in March. Jeff was on the look-out for retailers to take part and I was lucky enough that he put my name forward (I still owe him a couple of beers for that!)



The IBC has been running for 15 years and is now recognised as one of the most prestigious annual bottled beer competitions in the world. Over 30 countries were represented in this year’s competition with a magnificent range of bottled beers being entered from some of the largest breweries in the world to some of the smallest pioneering microbreweries from countries such as Italy, Australia and the USA. There was plenty of representation from the UK as well.

This was about all the information I had before the event, except for the final email list of the thirty or so competition judges from which I managed to deduce that there was an interesting mix of brewers (including Stefano Cossi from Thornbridge and Yvan De Baets from the magnificent De La Senne brewery in Belgium), Beer writers and bloggers from across Europe, CAMRA Officials (including national spokesman Iain Loe and editor of ‘Beer’ Tom Stainer), wholesalers, tasting experts and of course retailers – including little old me!

The Event

The judging took place in the magnificent White Horse pub situated on the edge of Parson’s Green in south west London. The White Horse is a wonderful pub – it is large and spacious with a great outdoor drinking area, ideal for summer evenings. The food range is very good, the staff very friendly and knowledgeable and it has an awesome range of beer (UK and International, bottled and draught) and even Gloucestershire’s own Severn Cider on draught! Well worth a visit if you are ever in this part of London.



On arrival I was directed to the spacious rooms above the pub where I was welcomed by the very friendly staff from Agile Media/Off Licence News (the organisers of the event). After a few introductions and a bit of mingling we were called together and Jeff Evans gave us a quick briefing on the format of the day, the Judging process and the criteria to be used for awards. We were then split into our pre-designated tasting panels of five or six, each panel being led by an appointed team ‘Captain’ who was responsible for co-ordinating the team and collating their scoring.

My team comprised of:

- Tim Hampson (Captain), a well respected beer writer and Chairman of the British Guild of Beer Writers.
- Bob Massey, a very amiable beer writer and blogger who is the European correspondent for the US blog – Brewclub.
- Howard Winn, an independent drinks consultant who worked for many years as a senior drinks quality advisor for Sainsbury's.
- Dale Tomlinson, a graphic designer who has designed a number of books about beer.

The Judging Process

Having done a fair bit of fairly unstructured, serial tasting and judging for beer festivals in the past, I was impressed at the organisation and structure of the process that we used on the day. The beers had been split into thirty three categories and each team was assigned a series of 'flights' of beers from individual categories to taste and judge. The eight flights that my team judged on the day were:

- 'No Alcohol/Low Alcohol' beers (known in the trade as NABLABS)
- Pale lagers above 5% (Part 1)
- Marzen/Vienna beers
- Milds and Strong Milds
- Strong Ales (Part 1)
- Golden Ales above 5%
- Dubbels, Belgian Browns and Reds
- Fruit Beers



For each 'flight' we were presented with all of the beers together so that we could carry out a side-by-side comparison of the beers (ranging between five and twelve beers in each flight). Each beer was presented in a half pint high-ball glass with about one or two inches of beer for sampling and crackers, water and spittoons were provided (although I never saw a spittoon being used all day!). Our team adopted the method whereby each of us would try the beers individually before taking it in turns to start a team discussion on each beer in sequence – returning for any required subsequent second/third tastes as we went along.

The aim was to come up with an overall team consensus of the quality and character of the beers and place them into one of the following four award categories:

- Gold Medal: A very good beer, one to seek out and recommend.
- Silver Medal: A good beer, one you would happily choose to drink.
- Bronze Medal: A fault free beer with some character.
- No Medal: A beer either lacking character or faulty.

In total my team tasted 53 three beers across the eight flights (I know – it's a tough job etc.) starting at about 9.30am and finishing just before 5.00pm (with a break for lunch and a swift pint!). In total we proposed just three Gold medals from our range of beers and about fifteen Silver medals – there were quite a few 'No Medals'.

Following the team tastings, a super judging panel comprising Jeff Evans and each of the team Captains was formed to re-assess all of the proposed 'Gold Medal' beers (and I believe, some of the high ranking 'Silvers') with the aim of ratifying the medal nominations and also identifying the champion beers in the following seven categories:

- Champion Lager (two awards)
- Champion Ale (two awards)
- Champion Stout or Porter
- Champion Wheat
- Champion NABLAB
- Champion Fruit Beer
- Champion Speciality Beer



From these beers the Supreme Champion for 2011 will also have been identified.

The Results

The list of Gold, Silver and Bronze medallists was published in Off Licence news on 22 July 2011. There were just 25 Gold medallists out of over 400 entries which proves just what a 'tough' bunch of judges we were to satisfy. The Gold medallists proposed from my team turned out to be:

- Fyne Ales Vital Spark
- Samuel Adams Boston Lager
- Samuel Adams Stony Brook Ale

Other Gold medallists included Wye Valleys excellent Country Ale, the dark Czech lager; Krusovice Cerne and the magnificent German Weihenstephaner Vitus – which together with Vital Spark and the Sam Adams Boston Lager are all available in **Favourite Beers** at the time of writing.

The Champions will be announced at an awards dinner in September – I'm looking forward to it!

Reflections

I was very honoured to be selected to take part in this year's IBC and I'm keeping my fingers crossed that I will be invited back in 2012. I met some great people and tasted some fantastic beers. A few specific reflections on the experience are:

- What a great bunch of friendly, interesting, welcoming and inclusive people work in the beer industry.
- How bland a group of high alcohol lagers can be!
- It is possible to taste 53 beers, have a pint for lunchtime and still want another beer whilst waiting for your train at Paddington!
- How diverse some of the beers that are placed in specific categories can be – particularly in the case of Milds and Fruit Beers.

Re-using the process



Following on from the IBC, I was keen to introduce the same tasting/judging process for this year's Cheltenham Beer Festival. Since we started the beer festival six years ago, we have always judged the range of beers on the Friday evening before the festival. In past years, however, there have been some fantastic beers that haven't got the recognition they deserved – mainly due to the serial nature of the process we used and the fairly primitive scoring system that allowed a powerful veto to those judges who didn't like a particular style of beer.

This year the new process proved very successful and everyone involved felt it was a great improvement. Out of forty eight beers at the festival we only awarded seven Gold Medals, but each of those beers were in outstanding condition and had plenty of character. Our Champion beer was Bristol Hefe from Bristol Beer Factory - a superb wheat beer which I don't think would have had a chance to shine under the old system.