

The New "What Are Beer Styles?"

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Beer styles today are something different than those first codified under Michael Jackson's experiences in *The World Guide To Beer* in the 1970s, which represented a monumental effort and innovative approach to a new gastronomic taxonomy. As important and useful as it was, this framework did have a few largely unnoticed limitations. As beer styles were first named and added, they aimed first to organize beer products into distinct categories based not only on ingredients, provenance, tradition and sensory attributes, but also primarily by name. These names referred to how the products were marketed and were the easiest and most compelling way to group beers believed to be similar. The time was also important. Jackson covered an appreciable part of the globe's brewing countries and created an ethnographic snapshot of the types of beer brewed in his day and contained to a couple dozen categories, nested comfortably in several Old World cultural brewing traditions. One additional attribute of this codification we should explore is that of a global perspective, as opposed to a local or regional one. One final thing to keep in mind is the inherent nature of a system that is meant in some meaningful way to apply all beers.

An Appreciation For Use Cases And Functionality With Regard To Beer Styles

Why do we have beer styles? Beer styles as a singular concept serve a variety of purposes. Michael Jackson's need in his seminal ethnographic work was for a basic, non-scientific taxonomy and nomenclature. His requirement was for the identification and grouping of similar beers of notable import according to tradition, ingredients and sensory profiles, largely for the benefit of an amateur audience of beer enthusiasts. This basic framework enabled a fundamental understanding of world beers according to national brewing cultures and regional variation therein. This laid a firm foundation for future evolution of beer styles.

Competition beer judging, specifically in the United States, placed additional and unique functional demands on a beer styles framework. The Brewer's Association now has a standard for competition classes for American brewers. In this past, this list of styles has been influenced

by donors, organizers and trends. A unique positive feature of the Brewer's Association competition list of style categories is that it is compiled every year. This allows edits and changes to the structure.

Uses at RateBeer are two: 1) For annual and ongoing competitions and lists by category, and 2) to assist users in understanding beers in a sensible and natural framework.

Beer Styles Are Successful Marketing Terms/Toward Style Criteria

When a brewer brings a beer to market, he or she employs a name meant to associate and differentiate the product to and from others. Names often suggest a strength, color, and sensory profile and use terms common to other products that allow the consumer to build an expectation based on past experience. When certain terms become common to a group of similar products in one or more regions, a basis for style consideration is created.

Additional features forming a basis for style are 1) codification - the formation of some type of definition for the style that may include notes on ingredients, sensory profile, strength and provenance, 2) use by more than a small set of brewers -- say a dozen, 3) a need for distinction between a traditional beer style and a new group of products whose fidelity to the original style is weak or absent, 4) persistence over time -- a style only makes sense if it's used for more than two years in the marketplace, 5) in current use and 6) coherence. By coherence, it's meant that the beers in the group describe a range of related sensory profiles. For the sake of examining the existence of a style or not, examples that limit coherence may be omitted.

Additional supporting but certainly not required criteria might include 1) a national flagship, 2) recognition by a national or international beer or homebrew organization, 3) establishment as a protected designation of origin product or differentiation from a protected designation of origin such as the separation of Craft/Modern "lambic" from its Belgian inspiration.

Beer Flavors, Consumer Tastes & The Words That Bring Them Together Are Always Evolving

Because existence over time is a real criteria, and beer styles, especially new ones, evolve over time, affordances should be given to evolutions that add to or extend some features while being true to the foundational elements of style. A beer style name will always change over time. The beers that it describes may also change. The name may also evolve by splitting, taking on a meaningful modifier or disappearing altogether.

Attention and acceptance of these facts should be considered when considering a style. A beer style is both the name of the product group and the nature of the product group itself, both of which are naturally in flux.

Styles Aren't Global, They're Regional

The establishment of style should not be constrained by a lack of global acceptance. Styles are regional and are a natural, established set of terms to describe products for communication between brewers and consumers.

This may mean a "style" may vary, maybe even broadly, by region. Efforts should be made to consolidate this range of products under the umbrella of the same style by the acceptance of a shared, common language, especially within the same country, language, continent.

Codification Itself Has Limitations, Is Arbitrary

Most people who have dealt with the creation or editing of style categories quickly understand that any style system is

- Incomplete - not every beer will fit the system

Because of the natural variance within a same brewery, over time, over space, and in between brewers, the only complete categorization system is one where the number of categories approaches the number of beers contained in it. A balance must be struck between the number of categories and the use case requirements of that categorization system.

- Erroneous - there will be problems assigning beers to categories and the categories themselves will not all be ideal

RateBeer's most important use case is when new beers are assigned a style category. When users do this, they are bound to make mistakes. How can we limit these mistakes and present fewer, better options? Currently 92 options are presented. We aim to reduce this number significantly.

- Somewhat arbitrary - why create Flanders Red and not a Kentucky Common?

Creating a category has happened ad hoc with discussions limited by a number of communication factors, including time, distance and media. The requirement for not only categories, but also *criteria for creating categories* has become essential. By reducing the subjectivity of category creation, their creation becomes less arbitrary.

Definitions: Traditional, Industrial and Craft Beer Traditions

Beer styles, as regionalized terms communicating product characteristics to consumers, have most impact and meaning within a geographic area defined by a product's distribution. They also have most meaning when tied to a particular evolutionary arm of nomenclature, supporting a taxonomy most often related to a cultural brewing tradition.

Defining the richest, most influential and most persistent brewing traditions should inform our methods for adopting, defining and accepting new beer styles. Below is a proposed set of brewing traditions accepted and not accepted for establishing a set of taxonomic parent, historic styles:

Germanic Traditional - Distinct from Industrial lagers and inclusive of Austria, Bavaria, and other parts of Germany.

Anglo-Irish Traditional - This certainly includes English revival

Belgian Traditional - Also includes Belgian revival of the 1970s

Danish Traditional - ??? We should consider adding these styles as they are fairly well defined, fairly numerous, mostly extant today, and have inspired modern examples with varying fidelity to the original products

Traditions that would not be listed in independently

- American Traditional - Includes American Adjunct Lager, California Common, Kentucky Common, American Bock
- Italian Traditional - Seemingly simple set of categories mostly related to strength
- Czech Tradition - Again a simple set of styles almost purely related to color and strength and amenable to more generic categorization with greatest contributions embedded under Germanic (Per: Perhaps combined with Germanic?)
- Polish Traditional

Industrial Lagers - A product of industrialization, these beer styles are almost always pale lagers of varying strength, and include new products

Modern/Craft - Includes the number of new and emerging styles of beer and regional takes on classic styles that lack fidelity. Examples

Generic Styles - Typically by color and strength. Dark Beer, Dark Strong Beer, Amber/Tan, Pale/White beer. Distinction between ale and lagers is less important than color and strength hence the term beer. This gives home to traditional beers that are less accepted and reproduced around the globe. One term for consideration is wheat, however their use in sour styles and to varying degrees makes it less useful in this structure.

Functional Requirements: Consumers And RateBeer

Research on consumer beer knowledge and selection is sparse but reflects what is generally known in the marketplace among retailers. Informal surveys of publicans, bar and bottle shop owners strongly suggest that ABV, color and intensity are the primary beer attribute factors in buying decisions and a natural consumer framework. This record supports findings by Martin Thibault and David Lévesque Gendron as well.

An Alternative Natural Structure

Outside of traditional styles is a broad and rich area for exploration and invention. Modern brewers, like modern chefs, musicians, painters can work outside of genre, tradition and other established classifications. A structure for containing these works relies on the acceptance and understanding of the natural range of possible works.

With natural consumer frameworks in mind, a certain universal, multidimensional order can be created for beers that fall outside of any traditional style or accepted nomenclature. These areas should be very general and catholic so that they serve the purpose of adequately categorizing orphan beers that fall outside of categories while not adding a burdensome set of additional categories.

One example is the lack of recognition of Italian terms that have evolved as natural styles. The term "doppio" means something to Italians while our system, that is rightly focused on Italy's largest breweries' growth from Germanic origins may place beers marketed this way in Doppelbock or Heller Bock categories. A more general framework would avoid this error by creating general generic categories -- e.g. Strong Dark Beer, Pale Beer, White Beer, Amber/Tan Strong Beer -- to better contain these placements.

Danish Hvidtol would also find easy placement among kin using this structure, as would Julol. Of course this is a fallback should Danish styles not be considered for inclusion as a distinct style.

What This All Means In Practice At RateBeer