



TOPIC: QUALITY

DRAFT BEER QUALITY – 5 THINGS TO GET RIGHT EVERY TIME

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A refreshing glass of draft beer properly served is the best possible format to sample the product – hands down. All other forms of packaging fall short when it comes to the proper presentation of the product to the consumer in a state that is ready to be enjoyed straight away. To get it right, there are several critical details that must come together to bring the beer into the right vessel at the right temperature and pressure to deliver the proper visual appearance and sensory experience that results in a delightful and delicious beverage occasion – every time.

“The best way to drink beer is from a glass. The visual appreciation of the color, foam and bubbles gives the first indications of quality. As you enjoy drinking your beer, you see the effects of foam stability and the foam clinging to the side of the glass. No other beverage offers the same experiences. If ever there was a beverage to be drunk from a glass, it is beer.” – Professor Glen Fox (PhD, FIBD) – Anheuser-Busch Endowed Professor Malting & Brewing Science, University of California, Davis

To master this quality conundrum there are multiple sources of information – the best among them is the Draught Beer Quality Manual from the Brewers Association. Rather than memorize all 124 pages of this beautiful document of quality guidelines, here are five things to focus on to get the draft (or draught if you prefer – both are acceptable) experience right consistently for complete customer satisfaction.

- Fresh Beer
- Clean Lines
- Serving Temperature
- Serving Pressure
- Clean and Appropriate Glassware

Fresh beer tastes better. That is a simple fact that must not be overlooked. Proper keg storage, keg rotation, ordering practices and brewery production cycles all play into this. Draft beer is most commonly unpasteurized and is at its peak freshness the day it is packaged. It is all downhill from there. Delivering fresh beer to the point of consumption should be the goal of the production plan. It is never a good idea to carry extra inventory of draft beer above the needs of the market in excess of 30 days. The planning and scheduling of brewing and packaging cycles is therefore key to meeting the freshness goals of the brewery out in the trade or in the taproom. The beauty of draft beer is in its freshness.

Code dates are not always obvious and transparent, and the importance of freshness to the positivity of the beer drinking experience is often overlooked. The implication of a “best before” date vs a pull date or an expiration date is not easily explained to the consumer. Beer does not go bad all at once – it is a slow and steady process that is exacerbated by poor (warm) storage conditions and impacted by many factors including but not limited by the following factors: ingredients, oxygen content, alcohol content (or lack thereof), bitterness, pH, microbial contamination, or any number of additives. The importance of the kegged beer storage temperature cannot be over-emphasized: flavor changes take place much more rapidly at warmer temperatures than when the beer is stored cold. When a standard beer goes past its recommended best before date it is not dangerous to the consumer, it is merely not as good as it was before. This is a gradual process. Day 31 is not usually distinguishable from day 30, but day 120 very likely is, and day 180 is going to be even worse. But we don't think about these dates when we drink draft beer because we often don't see them until someone says something.

Clean lines are a must for all draft beer delivery systems. Lines should be cleaned at a minimum frequency of every two weeks or ideally weekly. This service is free from most distributors in the US and is imperative for all draft systems – even more critical for long-draw systems. Proper temperature, chemical strength and minimum flowrates must be met for each particular system and cleaning should only be performed by trained professionals. Proper cleaning of these beer delivery lines represents not only a quality imperative – it could impact product safety if the chemicals used in cleaning are not adequately eliminated before the line is placed back in service.

Proper serving temperature for draft beer is critical for multiple reasons. The temperature at which CO₂ stays in solution must be achieved so that foam breakout does not occur when serving. Beer that is stored cold has much better microbiological stability than beer stored warm – especially if it is unpasteurized. Cold beer, like fresh beer, tastes better (in most cases). Ideal serving temperatures for most standard beers of typical CO₂ content are 38 – 40 °F (3 – 4 °C). Once the ideal temperature for a particular beer and draft system is determined by the brewers, this temperature should not be deviated from – it is a critical quality parameter that must be adhered to. If the beer is not stored cold it can take hours in the cold box to get it to the correct serving temperature and gallons of foam can be lost while trying to serve beer at the wrong temperature.

Proper serving pressure is also critical to avoid foam breakout and to achieve the desired flowrate. This is especially important during high demand serving periods. Nobody wants to be dumping pitchers of foam while thirsty customers are standing around waiting. Proper pressure is entirely dependent on the length of the draw, the temperature of the beer, its CO₂ content, and the number and types of fittings. It is therefore different for different systems and may involve a mixture of both nitrogen and CO₂ not only for nitrogen systems, but also for long-draw systems where CO₂ alone will result in beer over-carbonation, and the consequences of this such as excessive foaming. Sizing and determining the proper pressure for a delivery system needs to be a known entity for each individual set-up and must be achieved with accuracy.

The right glassware is an often-overlooked aspect of the draft beer experience. The ubiquitous shaker pint is a popular favorite in the US. It is cheap, stackable and serviceable, but it doesn't always provide the best draft beer enjoyment opportunity. Finding the proper glass for each style of beer is often a personal choice, but there are good guidelines out there that will explain the difference between a snifter and a chalice. Glassware cleaning is also often a mixed practice as well as glassware storage. Glassware cleaning (and rinsing) is critical for proper quality in the glass. It is always equally disappointing to encounter a glass with bubbles stuck to the sides where the grease particles are still hanging onto the glass rather than beautiful lacing of a perfectly clean glass or a draft beer with the distinct aroma of detergent wafting up through the foamless surface. The practice of storing glassware in the fridge next to the cocktail onions or in the freezer after improperly rinsing are also to be avoided. Properly cleaned, rinsed and stored glassware will ensure a satisfying draft experience.

Mike Gerhart, Senior Advisor, Technical Services at First Key Consulting, says, "Proper pouring isn't just about serving beer; it's about respecting the craft and ensuring every sip delivers the brewer's intended flavor, quality, and experience."

Troubleshooting draft beer quality issues is at once difficult and complicated (especially with long-draw systems), but it often comes down to one of the five critical components discussed. A simple checklist is the best tool for servers to follow when troubleshooting draft quality events in real time. A laminated card with the proper temperature and pressure at or near the pressure gauge and temperature monitor is always a good starting point. Every server should know where to find this information. They should also know when the lines were last cleaned, who cleans them and how. How to clean, rinse and store the glasses is also the purview of the server. Training of these individuals should be a key component of the quality program. Your brewery quality plan should encompass every step of the process, up to and including the point of consumer experience. After all, it is this ultimate experience that helps create consumer loyalty and long-term success for your brewery.
