



TOPIC: QUALITY

TASTE PANEL ETIQUETTE – WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT

🕒 5 min read

A well-trained and cohesive internal taste panel is a critical component of a sensory program in any brewery or beverage company. The taste panel has three main goals and mandates:

1. Ensure existing product quality and consistency
2. Develop and evaluate new products
3. Empower employees with training that fosters inclusivity

To meet all three goals consistently, proper training and etiquette are vital keys to success. Taste Panels are a necessary element of a quality system. The reason a panel is necessary is that no single taster has all the tools at their disposal to make appropriate quality decisions. All tasters are humans and as such have inherent differences in their perceptive abilities. Furthermore, these are not all learned skills – some members will be anosmic to certain elements such as Diacetyl and other defects. That is why a panel must be constructed to cover all aspects of flavor and aroma dimensions. All taste panels need rules and guidelines to function properly and maintain quality in the brewery while providing proper evaluations of products.

“Taste Panel etiquette centers on building an environment where independent evaluations can occur without influence from outside factors. In this way panel etiquette isn’t just about being courteous, it’s about accurately and confidently measuring how a product is perceived.”

– Lindsay Barr, *Founding Partner & CSO, DraughtLab*

These guidelines should be particular to the brewery, clearly documented and should include the obvious such as scheduled time and place, no smoking, gum-chewing, or eating prior to tasting, complete bans on perfume or cologne or scented lotions, and how and when to clean the glassware, and so on.

A first-time taste panel participant at a brewery often faces a somewhat harrowing experience. In addition to written rules, most taste panels have their own set of unwritten rules, the navigation of which can be made more difficult if the taste panel does not incorporate proper etiquette into its routines. Taste panels can miss defects and push forward incompletely developed new products if there is any inherent bias or favoritism developed by entrenched attitudes and/or lack of proper decorum.

These five simple guidelines for etiquette should be incorporated into the written procedures for every taste panel in some way to foster inclusivity and eliminate sources of potential bias:

1. Be seated and be quiet

“There is no talking while tasting” is an easy rule to follow and is usually followed quite well. The key is to stay seated and stay quiet until all taste panel members have finished – that’s the hard part. It is important to minimize possible distractions, including conversation among other participants, as distracted tasters are more likely to lose focus and become less effective at catching defects or recommending potential product improvements. Distracted tasters are more likely to lose focus and therefore less effective at catching defects or improving a product.

2. Remain expressionless and keep opinions to themselves

Simply being quiet is not enough on its own. Taste panel members should maintain a neutral expression throughout the tasting session, since nothing produces instant partiality as much as one taster dramatically reacting to whatever is in their glass. Words are not necessary when the brewmaster makes a frowny face while sniffing beer #3 – inherent bias creeps in for the other tasters. Inside jokes about the products that are being tasted or the taste panel in general are also not helpful and can actually work in direct opposition to efforts directed at encouraging inclusivity. If people don't feel in on the joke, they may fear it applies to them. Fearful tasters are also more likely to lose focus and therefore become less effective at catching defects.

3. Allow everyone to speak in turn and listen when they do

Once everyone has finished tasting it is a very important function of the panel to talk about the beers (or the hop-waters or whatever else they are tasting.) The sharing of comments aloud while the product is still in front of the tasters is critical to the development of the panel, as the connections made between the words and the flavors and aromas discovered during tasting will help develop a lexicon for the panel to employ going forward. When one panel member says “esters” and another panel member smells the esters in the glass, this further solidifies the training of all members of the panel. This sort of commonality is only possible in an environment where everyone is allowed a voice while others listen. If some tasters are denied the opportunity to express their opinions, diverse views will not be heard and opportunities will be missed.

4. Do not disparage other tasters, the competition, or anyone else

Since taste panel members will not always agree on matters of quality, level of defect, or even preference in style or approach, there needs to be a systematic method in place for deciding upon the follow up actions. As personal disagreements can lead to internal conflict, one should always challenge the idea rather than the person, and when looking for a path toward resolution, the emphasis should always be upon the process rather than the personality.

Disparaging the competition is also highly counter-productive insofar as it engenders an atmosphere of superiority which in turn may lead directly to bias. As biased tasters are generally less effective at identifying defects and inherently disinclined towards analysis, such prejudicial comparisons should be avoided.

5. Hold discussion until all tasters are finished and avoid rushing anyone

Different members of taste panels will taste at different speeds. If members feel rushed, they may struggle to complete the task thoroughly and properly, while if the panel speeds through the process without allowing all members ample time, then the panel will have missed the opportunity to reach its full potential. It only takes a quick “Is everybody done?” when everyone is clearly not done to create that air of rushing for those one or two tasters who are not done which will then cause them to rush through those last couple samples and have an incomplete evaluation. Rushed tasters are more likely to lose focus and are therefore less effective at recognizing defects.

These five guidelines for etiquette are not just appropriate for taste panel success, they also apply to cross-functional meetings or any other group discussions geared toward fostering improvements in communication. When people respect and listen to their peers they are much more likely to learn from one another and feel included and valued for their contributions, which will in turn make them more valuable and effective taste panel members.

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