

# Judging Brewing in Aethelmearc

THL Madoc Arundel, CF, CSH, CS, CLM  
meadbrewer@yahoo.com

There is very little difference in the judging of home brewed beverages between the modern hobby and the historical practice – at least from a technical perspective. However, unlike our modern counterparts, we have the additional consideration of having to account for historical documentation, legacy equipment, and period practices. Additionally, in Aethelmearc, the A&S office has published rubrics designed to allow for some consistency in judging from one competition to the next, and has defined within those rubrics many of the thresholds required for accurate scoring. Over the course of this class, we will look at the technical issues involved in judging as we as discuss these additional considerations.

## Responsibilities of the Judges

We've all met them before... the gentles who strive to judge a competition because “I really love a good home brew.” The number one issue with these volunteers is that they usually are not interested in judging the finer points of a competition entry, but rather in enjoying the flavors of the many beverages at the table. The number two issue is that judging a competition is not about what you like or don't like. In fact, if someone is judging a competition based on what they personally like, that is a competition into which a serious brewer should not be entered. Competitions are not popularity contests, and any entry into a competition deserves to be judged as to how well it emulates its “perfect” counterpart, regardless of the individual judge's personal tastes.

Judges should have enough experience and/or be well read enough to be familiar with the most common ingredients, techniques, and primary and secondary sources. Only in this familiarity can intelligent questions be asked of the entrant, and the historical aspects of the brew be fairly and competently evaluated.

Judges need to take the time to read the documentation. Given time constraints, at the very least the judges should check the bibliography and foot notes for known primary and secondary sources, verify that each of the ingredients in the recipe is documented or explained, and that deviations from period practices are accounted for. In a perfect world, judges should review the documentation before asking the entrant any questions and before sampling or scoring the beverage itself.

Judges need to evaluate – not enjoy. I will detail the steps in evaluating an historical beverage below; but I want to reinforce the understanding that this is neither a tasting nor a cocktail party. It is imperative that the judges not become intoxicated during the judging. All aspects of the beverage and the process must be evaluated sufficiently to ensure an accurate score. Just as much time must be given to the last entry as to the first.

## The Rubric

Aethelmearc rubrics in general address six separate areas of evaluation for any A&S entry: Documentation, Authenticity, Complexity, Creativity, Workmanship, and Aesthetics. Each of these are detailed as to what the judges should look for when assigning a score, although you will notice that there is some overlap between categories. As an example, for the brewing rubric, period ingredients are noted in Documentation, Authenticity, and Complexity. Prior to a competition, judges should be familiar with the rubric to ensure the most accurate scoring. As a side note, not all competitions will use this rubric. If a different set of standards is advertised by the competition coordinator, the judges should ensure that

they have a very clear understanding of the “criteria of the day.” It is not improper for judges to ask questions of the competition coordinator throughout the competition, but time and consistency are better served if the judges are well briefed prior to its start.

Copies of the rubric are available electronically at the Aethelmearc A&S website and the Brewers Guild website.

## **Documentation**

When judging documentation, the judge must read the reference to ensure that it supports the entrant's intention. If the entrant is justifying the use of elder flowers in a brew, and has a source document for elder berries, the reference is largely irrelevant. The judge should also scan the bibliography and the footnotes to ensure that a majority of referenced sources are actually cited throughout the article. As a judge, I have seen documentation that had an extensive bibliography with only three or four of the sources referenced in the text. This would imply that the entrant “padded” the bibliography rather than applying the knowledge from those sources.

When it comes to documentation, a lot of people jump to the conclusion that very little was written about brewing in the Middle Ages. Usually, the default position is to jump into Cindy Renfrow's *A Sip Through Time* or to rely on Digbie's ...*Closet*... However, there are a significant number of sources published in period (primary/secondary source) or referenced by more modern publications (secondary source) that are available with a simple internet search or through inter-library loans.

A primary source is a verified source published prior to the year 1600 that is contemporary with the entry. “Gray area” primary sources (those published between 1600 and 1650) are accepted by most brewing competition judges, which is why Digbie enjoys such renown. For brewing entries, primary sources might include herbals, medical treatises, agricultural or horticultural works, culinary references, guild records, tax rolls, census documents, and scientific studies. Primary sources are essential for high scores in documentation.

Secondary sources are those that are written/published post period or are in period but not contemporary with the entry, but directly cite primary documents. Identifying these sources is fairly easy as they will have extensive bibliographies with the primary sources listed, and in general will include author's notes expounding on the references, or quotes in order to lend some context to the citation. For brewing, some of my favorite secondary source authors with recent publication dates include Acton & Duncan, Gayre, Schramm, Renfrow, and Jackson. The specialty brewer series of books published by the Brewers Association (beertown.org) are also decent secondary sources. Secondary sources are essential for achieving more than the minimum scores for documentation.

Tertiary sources are those that paraphrase primary or secondary sources, or that provide reasoned and logical extrapolation from primary or secondary information. Tertiary sources are the bare minimum that should be expected for any competition, and are not definitive by any stretch of the imagination. In most cases, tertiary sources are best used to identify the primary or secondary sources they draw from in order to be able to go back to those sources. Some tertiary sources I have used include modern scientific studies in organic chemistry or horticulture/agriculture where the findings are relevant to brewing or vintning, such as investigations into adverse fungus in hops crops or cross-varietal experiments with grapes. University archives are wonderful places to locate tertiary sources in the realm of scientific studies.

Beyond a tertiary source, we have what I prefer to call “pure conjecture.” These sources are easily identifiable by their vague language and broad references. Beware of any source that makes broad, unsupported statements with a limited or non-existent bibliography.

## **Authenticity**

This really goes hand in hand with documentation. When judging authenticity, the judge must look at the ingredients, the processes, and the finished product itself to determine if they match a period counterpart. An entrant can document an entire 14<sup>th</sup> century beer recipe, complete with period equipment and technique, then produce the entry with all modern equipment and commercially procured malt and hops. Conversely, an entrant could grow, spawn, and roast their own malt, cultivate their own hops, and ferment using wild yeast, all while turning in documentation bearing nothing but conjecture sources. The successful competitor will do both. Authenticity means putting into practice what one has already documented.

When an entrant writes their documentation, they should include not just the period information, but their own ingredients, equipment, and techniques as well. The judge should be able to look at the docs and determine how closely the brewer followed the period methods. Where the brewer deviates from the period practice, an explanation should be provided. Perhaps it was for sanitation reasons, or availability (or lack thereof) of an ingredient, or cost that led the brewer to an alternate or more modern method. While these explanations can be considered, the Authenticity score should be based strictly on the actual authenticity – not on the explanations for lack of such.

Authenticity is one of the primary reasons that I prefer active judging. This is when the judges and the brewer are face to face during the judging process, and the judges are free to ask questions of the brewer. These could include asking for more detail on the source of the ingredients, the actual techniques used, clarifying some point made in the published documentation, or simply discussing alternative methods that might or might not have been employed. It's important to note that Authenticity has absolutely nothing to do with the quality of the finished product.

## **Complexity**

Complexity has some overlap with Authenticity. Complexity deals with the difficulty in producing the finished product. In brewing/meadmaking/vintning, Complexity would include how the ingredients were procured and processed. Obviously, using the modern means to process ingredients would be less complex, and it would also be less authentic. Note that both scores can be affected by the same consideration.

Not so obviously, use of a mortar and pestle is more complex than a powered grain mill for crushing the grains; but probably not more authentic. For that reason, these two categories cannot go hand in hand across the board. Consider the period means of obtaining ingredients or equipment. In many cases, a period brewer may have procured his own, but not always. As an example: while period breweries may have run their own malt houses, there was a period when gruit was processed and sold solely by members of the church. For a brewer in a modern SCA competition to grow and process his/her own gruit might be more complex (and thus gain a higher Complexity score), but not necessarily be more authentic.

## **Creativity**

In some ways, Creativity is the antithesis of Authenticity. This does not mean they are mutually exclusive or that one cannot score well in both categories. It simply means that being creative in the blend of ingredients or the techniques used involves a finished product that cannot be justified by a single example. To put it in simpler terms... Creativity comes from combining elements of different period sources, and perhaps even different time periods, into a single entry. As one example, the earliest documentation I can find for peaches used in brewing is an 18<sup>th</sup> century reference in what is now the Czech Republic. However,

peaches in the daily diet are documented well before the Roman Empire, and can be documented as a garnish for alcohol in 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain. Therefore, extrapolating from this to include peaches in the production of a melomel may be worth points for Creativity, while documenting the peaches themselves in period may preserve points under Authenticity.

When judging Creativity, give heavier consideration to how the brewer solved problems, combined ingredients (recipe formulation), and interpreted sources. Someone who correctly and fastidiously recreated a period recipe may score very well in Authenticity and Documentation while scoring very low in Creativity, while a brewer who substituted another documentable herb for an unidentified ingredient in the same recipe may score a little higher in Creativity, whether or not they sacrifice points in the other categories.

## **Workmanship**

Workmanship in a word is judging the finished product. This category makes up nearly all the considerations in modern brewing competitions while being relegated to just 16% of Aethelmearc competitions. Yet, this is probably the second most important category for the SCA judge (behind Documentation), and the most difficult to deal with. It is under Workmanship when the judge must be most careful *not* to allow personal taste preferences to skew the objective scoring.

The judge must be aware of off-flavors and negative byproducts that may be present in the finished drink. A comprehensive list is available on the attachment (score sheet), and we will touch on most of them in open discussion. However, it's not all about flavor. Workmanship must also include how closely the entry matches its “perfect” counterpart. If the brewer claims to have produced an English brown beer, but the entry tastes more like a continental lager, then the workmanship was not very good... even if it tastes wonderful. Workmanship will also consider aroma, carbonation levels, clarity, suspended particulate material, sweetness/bitterness, and alcohol content. Remember – even if it looks bad, smells bad, and tastes bad, if it is supposed to be all those things, then the Workmanship is very high – think Lambic. The question the judge must ask with each aspect of the beverage is, “is this how it is supposed to be?”

## **Aesthetics**

This is probably the least well defined category in the judging rubric. Aesthetics is a standard A&S judging criteria that basically boils down to how good something looks. In brewing, Aesthetics may refer to the appearance of the beverage itself – is it the right color? ...the right clarity? Does it have the right mouth feel? If it's a mead or wine, does it have 'legs'? Does it visually appeal to the drinker? Once again, these criteria must be judged per the brewer's desired goal rather than the judges' personal preferences. If the documented beverage is supposed to look like the gray water coming off a potter's wheel, then that is the aesthetic the entry must be judged against.

In many competitions, Aesthetics will also include something more commonly called 'Presentation'. This would be how the beverage is presented to the judges. In short, the container that it is in and how it is labeled. Note that even though these aspects have little to do with the actual beverage, they are spelled out in the rubric, and therefore must be judged in 'official' venues.

## **The Judging Process**

Understanding the various factors to be judged in a brew is most of the battle. The remainder of the judging is simply applying some practical tips, which we shall discuss here and put into practice during the practical portion of the class.

1. Most important: Do not allow yourself to become intoxicated during the judging. Some competitions will have many entries, and you do a serious disservice to those whose efforts are judged later in the competition if you are too drunk to give an honest, accurate, and objective scoring. You must take a large enough taste of the brew to be able to judge mouth feel, body, and flavor. However – and this will sound like sacrilege to many of you – you should then spit out the excess rather than swallowing. Not only will this prevent intoxication, but it will also avoid the unpleasantness that sometimes accompanies the mixing of different liquors in the human stomach.
2. Have cold water and some sort of neutral food (unsalted crackers or plain bread) on hand to cleanse the palette between samples. Nothing skews the flavor of a beverage as much as the flavor of the previous beverage lingering on the tongue and in the back of the throat.
3. Eat something prior to judging – preferably some sort of bready food or starch. This will help allay any gastronomical issues should you fail to comply with Tip #1.
4. Arrange your beverages prior to sampling any. Beers and ales should be arranged lightest in body/flavor to heaviest, and least bitter to most. Wines and meads should be arranged driest to sweetest. This minimizes the lingering effects that a stronger or heavier beverage will have on the taste buds when judging the lighter beverages.
5. Ensure beverages are served for judging at the appropriate temperature – chilled, warmed, or room temperature, the correct temperature can affect the flavor and aroma.
6. Use clear glass (preferred) or clear plastic as a tasting cup. This allows you to see the clarity and color of the beverage very easily, and in the case of meads or wines allows the observance of legs. Make certain to either rinse the glass thoroughly between samples, or use a fresh glass with each sample.
7. Before judging any beverage, review the documentation. Ask questions to get a better feel for what the brewer was going for. Learn as much as you can about the beverage in order to be able to give it an honest assessment.
8. Carbonated beverages should be splashed into the glass initially to generate a head. This allows the aroma to come forward, and allows the judge to determine if the level of carbonation is appropriate for the beverage.
9. When sampling the aroma, swirl the glass first, then stick your nose right down into it and slowly inhale. Do it twice – once with your mouth closed and once with it open, as the addition of ambient air through the mouth will change your perception slightly (it brings the taste buds unto the aroma equation.)
10. Your first sip should come right on the heels of your last sniff. Allowing the aroma to linger in the back of your throat when sipping will enhance the flavor. Swish the liquid around in your mouth to get a good feel for it and to thoroughly douse your taste buds... then spit (see Tip #1.)
11. Score the beverages as you go. While it is okay to discuss the beverage with the brewer and the other judges, ensure that your score is YOUR score, and not a compromise or implicitly agreed upon consensus of the judges. Do not allow the brewer to influence your scoring except through the answering of questions you might have throughout the process. Always finish scoring one beverage before starting on the next one.
12. Last, but not least (and many would say this is the most difficult step), do not allow either recency

or the *halo effect* come into play in your judging.

Recency is the phenomenon that leads a judge to score the most recent sampling more favorably than previous entries. This comes into play generally when the judging has gone on for some time and the judges are either eager to get it over with (and thus taking less time to objectively render judgment), or because they are thinking less critically (see Tip #1) and become more apt to “show leniency” in the scoring.

The Halo Effect is almost the opposite. This occurs when the judge is so enamored of the first entry that all future entries have difficulty measuring up. It may also occur when a judge reaches their personal favorite in the judging, inadvertently awarding it superior points solely through a subconscious desire to see it score well.

Remember that as a judge, you must remain objective, honest, and competent (see Tip #1) throughout the judging process in order to give each and every entrant a fair and deserved appraisal.

What we will now do is we will review the attachment, and talk about the flaws and flavor variants that are possible in most fermented beverages. We will then use the scoring sheets to judge the various brews I have with me.