

How to Organize an Æthelmearc Brewing Competition

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In many respects, organizing a brewing competition in the SCA is little different from organizing one in the mundane world. There are some key differences, mostly because SCA competitions are much smaller than AHA or BJCP competitions, lead time is generally less in the SCA, and the SCA requires documentation for historical relevance. However, the devil being in the details, we don't have to deal with that devil as much in organizing a competition as we do in conducting one. In this class, we will discuss simply the steps necessary to ensure that brewers, vintners, and meadherers receive the same value in competition within our organization as they would in the mundane world. The competition may be a standalone (brewing only) or simply a category within a general A&S competition. Either way, the presence of alcohol means that there are some special considerations.

Promoting your competition

The biggest mistake that A&S organizers make in the SCA is in not providing enough lead time to include brewing and vintning entries. While beers and ales can finish in anywhere from two to eight weeks, wines and meads need upwards of a year or more to be at their full potential. For many brewers, this is not an issue as they will have product available for entry on a rotating schedule; but there are times when SCA competitions involve a theme – best use of an ingredient, or best representation of a holiday or saint's day for example. In such cases, sufficient lead time must be provided by the announcement of the competition to allow the brewers to respond appropriately.

Ensure that any limitations on those products are included in the literature and/or announcements. "Open to all home brewed beverages", "No distilled beverages" or "beer and cider only" are examples of possible limitations of which potential entrants must be aware.

Ensure that the announcement includes such details as whether brews will be broken down (e.g. judged by category of beverage, experience level of the brewer), lumped together in a single brewing category, or lumped together as a "best of show" entry. For some entrants, it is important to know if they are competing against novices or masters, or against weaving or woodcraft.

Use multiple avenues to announce the competition. Some options include: publication in the Æstel, announcement via the kingdom email list, flyers at events leading up to the competition, announcements in court, and putting the word out through various social media outlets. Certainly, get the word to the regional Brewers Guild representatives for dissemination among guild members, and possibly to A&S officers for dissemination within their local groups.

Venue

The judging of brewing as part of a larger A&S competition will most likely have a space set aside by the autocrat. There are some considerations that need to be made for brewing entries, however. These include several of the items listed below as the responsibility of the steward to procure. If the competition is not specifically for brewing, there may not be a steward and the overall competition coordinator should be aware of the requirements for setting up the judging of brewing entries.

One important consideration I have come to value over the years is to be removed from any area where populace can observe. Invariably, people will consider brewing and cooking entries to be an opportunity to eat and drink. The judges can be easily distracted by populous commentary, and in some cases I have seen members of the populous actually interfere with the judging by drawing the judges into discussions of brewing in general or by imbibing sufficient quantity of the entry to prevent honest appraisal by the judges. Populous can also attempt to influence judges, inadvertently or purposefully, with their own

commentary of the entries. None of this is good for the credibility or validity of the competition itself.

The venue must also have some means of ensuring that the entries are not consumed prior to the judging, usually by having a specific area set apart from other comestibles.

Stewards and Judges

If you wait for the day of the competition to organize your stewards and judges, you are way off the mark. Both positions need to be identified early on to ensure that they have time to prepare for the competition itself. While judges can be secured closer in to the competition, they still need enough of a heads' up to organize their time, ensure that their schedules are clear of conflict, and brush up on the rubric requirements. Stewards, on the other hand, need much more lead time – particularly if your steward is handling things like procuring the administrative items necessary for the judging to take place. A judge may be able to participate in other activities during an event, but a steward is probably dedicated solely to the competition set up, execution, and clean up.

Steward: Responsible for ensuring that all the administrative items are accounted for the day of the competition.

- Collect and collate the pre-registration or registration sheets
- Sufficient copies of the score sheets and judging rubrics
- Pens/pencils and perhaps highlighters
- A cooler with ice for entries requiring chilling (entrants may be required to supply their own)
- Palate cleansers (unsalted crackers or flat bread) and fresh water
- Cups (clear glass or plastic preferred): if glass is used, a pitcher of water to rinse them
- Table and chairs

The steward is also responsible for ensuring that the entries are laid out in the order in which they will be judged. Typically, the same people will not be judging beers/ales, wines, and meads; however, they may if the competition is small or if the brewing is just one or two entries in a general A&S competition. Entries should be laid out so that dry beverages are judged before sweet, light bodied entries are judged before heavier ones, and less-hopped/spiced beverages are judged before more-hopped/spiced ones.

If there are more than eight entries in a brewing competition, the steward should break them up into multiple groups. If this is the case, consider grouping them by style (e.g. beer, wine, mead), character (e.g. dry, sweet), or flavor (e.g. hoppy, sweet, spiced) and having separate judges for each group. Judging more than eight beverages can cause “palate fatigue” to set in, causing a disservice to later entries. If there are insufficient judges to assign separate judges to separate groupings, the steward should coordinate a break between groupings for the judges to refresh themselves. Fifteen to thirty minutes of bland food or neutral drinks (such as fresh water) can refresh the judges sufficiently to handle another set of beverages.

Judge: Responsible for evaluating the entry per the scoring criteria. Judges should be chosen for their ability to objectively evaluate the entry, understand the documentation, and provide constructive criticism. Remember that one of the most important aspects of an SCA competition is to assist the entrants in improving their art or science. Judges must:

- Stay sober
- Be able to evaluate and relate documentation to the entry and the processes used in production
- Stay sober
- Be objective

- Stay sober
- Be honest but constructive in commentary
- Stay sober

Do NOT choose judges based on their assertion that they “like home brew” or that they are also a brewer or vintner. Choose them for their ability to evaluate a beverage *despite* their personal likes or dislikes. More than anything else, a judge needs to be able to evaluate a finished product based on the brewer’s intended final product – not on whether the judge prefers a particular style. More about that in my “How to Judge an SCA Brewing Competition” class.

Judges should have food on their stomachs prior to judging, plenty of water for hydration and as a palate cleanser, and sufficient time in between entries to finalize their commentary and complete the score sheets.

The Rubric

Æthelmearc has two global sets of rubrics. The first is the one used at Ice Dragon, and addresses six separate areas of evaluation for any A&S entry: Documentation, Authenticity, Complexity, Creativity, Workmanship, and aesthetics. The second is the one used at Kingdom A&S and is still in development. That rubric addresses four separate areas of evaluation, and includes a requirement to assess documentation within each area. In both rubrics, the areas of interest are detailed as to what the judges should look for when assigning a score. You may notice there is some overlap between areas. As an example, for the brewing rubric, period ingredients are noted in Documentation, Authenticity, and Complexity. Whether you choose to use one of these rubrics or design your own, judges should be familiar with the rubric well ahead of the competition to ensure the most accurate scoring. If a different set of standards is advertised by the competition coordinator, the judges must ensure they have a very clear understanding of the “criteria of the day.” It is not improper for judges to ask questions of the coordinator throughout the competition, but time and consistency are better served if the judges are well briefed prior to its start.

Actual Judging

There are three basic methods for judging: Blind, Inclusive, and Active.

In blind judging (the technique used at Ice Dragon), the judges are not made aware of the identity of the artisan. Additionally, judges are generally not permitted to communicate with each other regarding the entry until after their score sheets are submitted. They judge each entry based solely on what they see before them – the finished product and the documentation. Blind judging can be useful in avoiding identity bias, but provides less opportunity for clarification of processes or ingredients and for direct feedback to the entrant. Blind judging generally takes about 5 to 15 minutes per entry depending on the complexity of the beverage.

In inclusive judging, the identity of the entrant may or may not be kept from the judges, but the judges do not interact with the entrant at all during the judging. Additionally, judges are generally permitted to discuss their impressions with each other before submitting a score sheet. In at least one competition in which I participated in another kingdom, the judges collaborated to produce a single consensus score rather than each judge submitting a separate score; but in general, I would discourage this type of scoring as a disservice to the entrant (who deserves to see each judge’s impressions.)

Active judging (the technique used at Kingdom A&S) is when the artisan is face to face with the judges, and able to interact with them throughout the judging process. Judges may ask questions, entrants may offer additional insight into processes or ingredients, and additional documentation can be provided verbally during the judging period. Feedback to the entrant is more “discussion” than “lecture”, and can

therefore be more productive. Active judging requires more time per entry – in general plan for anywhere from 20 to 60 minutes per entry for active judging.

Regardless of which method of judging will be used, the entrants must be made aware far enough in advance to be able to adequately prepare their entry.

Scoring and Reporting

Scoring can be done one of three ways.

Total Score: This is the sum of all the judges' scores added together. This score is only relevant if the total number of points available is made clear.

Average Score: Add together all the judges' scores and divide by the number of judges. This gives a score relative to the maximum score allowed by the rubric.

Composite or Consensus Score: This is the result of multiple judges contributing to a single score relative to the maximum score allowed by the rubric. This requires the judges to agree on scoring for each area outlined in the rubric.

Modified Score: Generally, only used when there are four or more judges, the score sheets are ranked by score, and the highest and lowest scores are discarded. The remaining scores are averaged or totaled to get the final score used for comparison.

Weighted Score: This is any of the above scores modified based on predefined skill levels. For example, someone who holds a brewing award may be judged more stringently in each rubric area than someone who is a novice.

Regardless of which scoring method is used, both judges and entrants must be advised well in advance of the competition in order to be mentally prepared for the results.

A competition may have one winner or several. This information needs to be included in the promotions. Are there winners for each category? Skill level? Or is there just one overall winner? If there are "best in category" or other breakdown, will there also be a "best in show?" Does a competition include a local or regional champion in addition to an overall winner despite geographic origin? How is each winner determined? Be clear on how each winner is determined so nobody walks away with hard feelings.

Prizes

Although appearing here as an afterthought, prizes are an important consideration. While they don't need to appear in the competition announcement or promotional materials, they do need to be sufficient recognition of the winners' achievement. Prizes may include a scroll, books, tools/equipment, ingredients, service (such as pitchers, mugs, bottles), tokens, or even someone else's beverage. The important thing for prizes is that they be something that will be appreciated by the entrant, and make them feel that it was worth the trouble to enter the competition.

One variation that I like to use for competitions at royal progress events is a "Queen's Choice" winner. This allows the royalty to be involved, provides additional recognition for the entrants, and flows logically from the Queen's role as patron of the arts and sciences. Make certain if you wish to include this option that you coordinate with the royalty well in advance, and include it in the announcement.