

BEER BUZZ:

BEER EVENTS 101: OPEN, SERVE, DRINK, REPEAT

by Joey Williams



Beer tastings and dinners are becoming more and more popular as themes for parties and get-togethers amongst friends, businesses and restaurants. The idea is similar, in theory, to many dinners and parties where wine is served alongside a meal or on its own throughout the event. There are many concerns and questions that come up when helping someone

with a beer event, whether that person is familiar with the wine equivalent or a first time host. Making exact pairings and menus is something that can only be done well on a case by case basis, but I hope to shed some light on several basic points that should be considered when planning an event.

The first thing that needs to be established is an idea. Will this be a tasting or a dinner? Will you serve an entire meal with beer to accompany, or will you serve beer as the main attraction with snacks to support? What is the central theme of the event, beer or food? When planning a dinner, the food is often the focus and the beer is chosen to pair with each particular dish. When a beer tasting is in order, it is often the beer that is chosen first, followed by snacks that will work well with a variety of the beers.

Once you've decided on your type of event and the running theme, you can get down to specifics. The progression of a dinner or tasting is important, because each beer and dish can affect the ones that follow. A few general rules to consider, like with wine, is to progress from light to dark, lower in alcohol to higher in alcohol and least assertive to most assertive. Light to dark is a fairly straight forward concept, progress from lightest in color to darkest in color, because darker colored beers generally have stronger grain flavors that will overwhelm beers brewed with lighter grains with lighter grain flavors. Lower in alcohol to higher in alcohol isn't as straight forward, but makes sense. Alcohol affects your ability to discern flavors, amongst other things, so a higher alcohol beer early on will numb your tongue to more delicate, lower strength beers. In addition, higher alcohol content beers often have stronger flavors and should be placed later in the tasting for that reason. It takes larger amounts of malt to reach that higher alcohol and a higher amount of hops to balance out the sweetness of the malt. Least assertive to most assertive is, again, fairly straight forward. The more flavorful a beer, the larger the influence it will have on your ability to taste other beers.

For a beer dinner, two possibilities that are often overlooked for beer are the Aperitif and Digestif positions. These two positions can be viewed as bookends for the event, a place to get things started and a place to wind things down. The aperitif is assigned the responsibility of tiding the guests over until the first round of food is served as well as stimulate the appetite for the feast that will follow. The aperitif is also a place where the beer should be interesting enough to stand on its own. For this reason, I suggest disregarding much of what I said above about progression. While you don't want to obliterate the tastebuds of your guests, you do want to get their attention and their appetites. I suggest a strong, dry and slightly

bitter beer. Think of the dry, crisp Belgian strong golden beer, Duvel, or the spicy, bitter Czech Pilsener, Pilsener Urquell. Neither of these beers is so immense that it will interfere with the rest of your event, but both are interesting enough to stand on their own.

The digestif is the place to bring out your fireworks, beers that are too big for food pairings. If we were all swimming in Samuel Adams' Utopias, then I'd say this is the time to bring that beer liqueur out, but I imagine we're not. This is the time to serve that bottle of Bourbon barrel-aged this or Imperial that. A little extra gift to the guests, a trophy for making it through the gauntlet you've laid out before them.

Glassware is often a question that comes up when people are putting together a beer event. Serving everyone pints of each beer is going to end up a liability and incredibly expensive. I suggest drawing influence from the wine industry and serving 4 ounce portions. If you go this route, and I think you should, then a 4 ounce pour in a pint glass is going to be an incredibly sad sight. An all-purpose wine glass will always do the trick in these situations. The shape of the glass will help to concentrate aromas to the nose and the norm for these glasses is to never be much more than $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ full. If a wine glass isn't in the cards, there are other options. I like to use a tall, slender, straight-sided glass called a "stange" in the beer classes we have occasionally downtown. The design is simple, understated and screams beer. The shape does little for concentrating aromas, but the tall, slender body causes the drinker to have to put their nose in the glass with each drink. A highball glass would serve a similar purpose. Half pint glasses can be found and wouldn't look as empty as their big brothers. In a pinch, large shot glasses or small rocks glasses would get the job done. Anyone that's gone to a beer bar and been offered a sample of beer before purchase has undoubtedly drunk in this manner.

Serving temperature is as frequent a question as proper glassware. Serving temperature comes down to a balance. The warmer a beer, or any drink, is, the more flavor and aroma can be perceived. Anyone that's drank a room temperature beer can attest, however, that it probably wasn't the most enjoyable beer they've consumed. The colder a beer is, the more refreshing and, usually, the more enjoyable the beer is. But, anyone that's tried a beer straight out of the fridge can confirm that much of the nuance and detail was lost to the frigid serving temperature. A balance can then be determined by personal preference and desired results. A general guideline is to serve lighter colored beers colder and darker beers warmer, much the way you would serve white wine cooler than red wine. The easiest way to attain an ideal serving temperature throughout an event is to chill everything down at once before the event, then remove everything at the same time at the beginning. This way the beers served later on will warm up and open up to unleash their stronger flavors when you need them.

Hopefully I've answered some of the questions surrounding how to execute an entertaining beer event. They are a great way to introduce others to the glories of a good beer and showcase the possibilities of great beer with exceptional food. If you're still looking for a place to start, here are a few beer lineups that I have helped customers set up.

continues on page 2



continued from page 1

Beer History Tasting

This tasting lineup includes a beer from all major brewing regions (Czech Republic, Germany, Belgium, United States and England) and features an important beer to each country's brewing history.

Pilsener Urquell

Weihenstephaner Hefeweizen
Saison Dupont
Anchor Steam
Fuller's London Porter

German Beer Tasting

This is a lineup that I helped pick out for a groups' German-themed tasting/dinner. The beers themselves, or the styles represented, are important to the history of German brewing.

Weihenstephaner Vitus Weizenbock

Spaten Premium
Schneider Weisse
Hofbrau Dunkel
Kulmbacher Eisbock

Dogfish Head Tasting Extravaganza

This is inspired by a Dogfish Head beer dinner I was fortunate enough to be invited to earlier this year at a local fine dining restaurant. The lineup featured several seasonal beers that are, sadly, not in season at present, so this is a list inspired by that dinner and not the actual list. It will, however, make for a delicious time.

60 Minute IPA

Midas Touch (Aprihop, when in season)
Raison D'Etre
Indian Brown Ale
Palo Santo Marron
120 Minute IPA

And, as always, if you have any questions you can always send them to me in an e-mail or stop in to the store on Smith Street and pick my brain in person, I geek out over these sorts of things. ☺

NEW ON SHELVES AT SPEC'S DOWNTOWN:

DeProef/Terrapin Monstre Rouge 750ml

St. Bernardus Christmas Ale 750ml

Oskar Blues Ten Fidy 4pk cans

Ommegang Three Philosophers 4pk

Guinness Foreign Extra Stout 4pk

Samuel Adams Winter Lager 6pk & 12pk

Samuel Adams Winter Classic 12pk



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