

# BEER SOMMELIERS AND 'HOW TO JUDGE BEER' AT THE BEER ACADEMY

 DR GEORGE PHILLISKIRK, THE BEER ACADEMY, UK. E-MAIL: GEORGE@BEERACADEMY.ORG

The author of this article, Dr George Philliskirk, is a longtime friend of the SBR in general and the technical editor in particular. Furthermore, George has for decades been one of most dedicated, successful and appreciated global crusaders for good beer, the understanding of it in all its many forms and the proper respect for it – not least as an accompaniment to fine foods.

The Beer Academy is a UK-based not-for-profit educational body dedicated to helping people understand, appreciate and enjoy beer sensibly. It was founded in 2003 by a small group of beer enthusiasts at the famous White Horse pub in Parson's Green, London, and it quickly attracted support and start-up funding from brewers, large and small, beer retailers, trade associations and consumer groups. The funding enabled training materials and courses to be established, and using the services of experienced ex-brewers as course tutors, the first courses commenced in early 2004. These range from 90-minute introductory sessions through to half-day, one, two and three-day courses catering for personnel in the beer and brewing industries as well as interested consumers, beer writers and journalists. In response to demand, in 2011 the Academy introduced an accreditation system for beer sommeliers and a course designed for potential beer competition judges and enthusiasts alike.

'Sommelier' is a term generally understood in the drinks industry to describe a person with the requisite skills and experience to advise on the selection, keeping and presentation of wine. In many countries there are official associations of sommeliers, often with a series of examinations, qualifications, or at least competitions. The Court of Master Sommeliers holds exams and awards the initials MS. But beer? Despite the fact that the knowledge and experience demanded of an expert beer taster is at least equal to that of a wine expert, few attempts have been made to elevate the status of the beer expert to that of the wine sommelier. In the USA, a programme to recognise the skills required was created in 2007 with persons

passing the rigorous process of written and practical exams and assessments called 'Cicerones'. In the UK, we have many excellent beer experts and tasters, but up to now no formal recognition or appreciation of these special skills. In 2011, the Beer Academy introduced the first formal recognition system with the inception of the Beer Academy Accredited Beer Sommelier award. To achieve the award, candidates must be able to demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of beer, including:

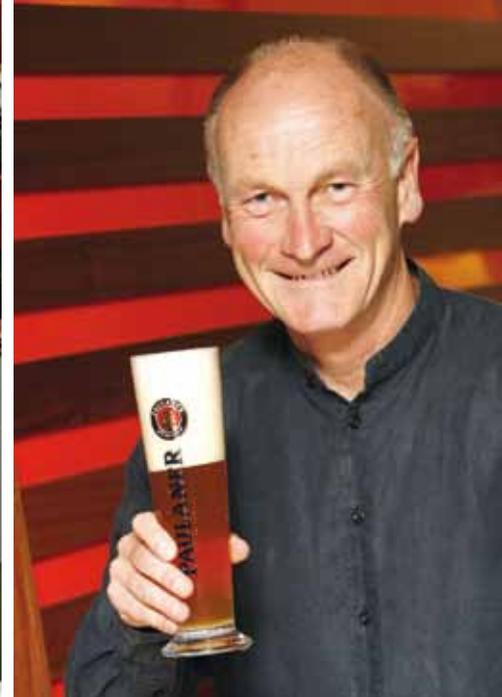
- the fundamentals of the brewing and packaging of beer
- the sensory evaluation of beer
- positive and negative features of beer
- an understanding of the different styles of beer and how to differentiate them
- beers from around the world
- cellar management and stock control
- beer dispense and presentation
- preparing a beer list
- how to match beer with food and preparing a beer-with-food menu
- beer vocabulary

Candidates must have attended and passed the Beer Academy's Advanced Course and the Cask Marque ABCQ course on cellar management, as well as attending the Beer Academy's How to Judge Beer course.

In application for the award, candidates must submit a Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) detailing relevant practical experience and →



*Beer Sommelier Awards Dinner*



*Dr George Philliskirk*

examples of work achieved which could involve: Evidence of beer and food matching; coaching and training of others; awards and recognition (e.g. Pub Guides); trade merchandising and POS based on beer range and choice; beer judging, writing and other publications.

Having satisfied the assessors with the PoE material, candidates are invited to attend an oral examination at which the PoE is reviewed and a practical tasting of different beers is carried out to test the detailed knowledge of different beer styles, flavour defects and opportunities for beer and food matching. Satisfactory completion of these assessments leads to the award of a certificate with the successful candidates recorded on the register of Accredited Beer Sommeliers which is listed on the Beer Academy website ([www.beeracademy.co.uk](http://www.beeracademy.co.uk)).

The first oral assessments were held on the 27th September 2011, and four successful candidates duly enrolled on the list. Alastair Scott, one of this illustrious group, commented as follows: 'It is so exciting that the Beer Academy have introduced this qualification for beer. As one who enjoyed beer without really understanding it for too many years, I have really enjoyed the process of learning to become a Beer Sommelier. Finding great beer and food matches is always fun, and understanding different beers is so interesting. I love telling people that the German lager Kolsch is actually an ale!! While I was very nervous having not done an exam

for too many years, George (the examiner) made me relax but still took me through my paces. While I am one of the first to become a Beer Sommelier I hope that this is not an exclusive qualification and that we overtake wine sommeliers in supporting and understanding our national drink! I am also very pleased that my own pub, in Bristol, is hosting Beer Academy courses and helping not only to give people a greater knowledge and understanding of beer but, more importantly, enabling them to enjoy it more'. The second group of sommeliers was assessed in early November and introduced an international dimension with successful applicants Amund Arnesen from Norway and Ric Brown from Atlanta, USA, joining the list of accredited sommeliers.

The 'How to Judge Beer' course was rolled out in 2011 to help professionals, enthusiasts and beginners understand how to assess and judge the quality and style of a beer. This knowledge can be used to enhance the experience and enjoyment of tasting beer as well as preparing judges in beer competitions for the processes and standards required. There are many and varied beer competitions organised in the UK variously by Camra, SIBA, supermarkets, trade bodies and trade media, but the course could help licensees and managers organise their own beer competitions in the pub. The course, which lasts half a day, is held at venues throughout the UK and covers the following subjects:

- flavour; taste; aroma; smell – what do we mean?
- where do beer flavours come from? – raw materials; brewing processes
- identifying the major flavour contributors in beer – the language of flavour
- beer defects – flavours in the wrong place?
- beer styles – where do they come from and what do we mean?
- how do beer competitions work – how to prepare; practical tips; panel interactions

This new course has proved very popular with over 300 people attending to date and with the prospect of a longer, more advanced course on a similar theme being rolled out in 2012. ☺

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr George Philliskirk is a director of the Beer Academy, an educational trust dedicated to helping people understand and appreciate beer. After completing a PhD on yeast research at Birmingham University's Brewing School in the mid-'70s, George has spent almost all his working life in the brewing industry, and before joining the Beer Academy in 2004, he was head of the Technical Department for Carlsberg UK.

He is a fellow of the Institute of Brewing and a past chairman of the Board of Examiners of the Institute of Brewing and an external examiner at Heriot-Watt University. He lectures for the Institute of Brewing and Distilling, the Beer Academy and the Scandinavian School of Brewing and writes on beer and brewing as a member of the British Guild of Beer Writers. For several years, he presented at the BBC's Good Food Show where he was introduced to the audience as 'The Beer Doctor'!

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 Kulholmsvej 24-28  
 DK-8930 Randers NØ  
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 holvrieka@holvrieka.dk