

The Beverage People
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Fermenting Beer with Fruit

by Sean O'Connor

We've had a lot of interaction with Sean as a customer here at The Beverage People including judging on some panels at competitions locally and as a member of the local brew club - the Sonoma Beerocrats. He's been an active brewer since 1992 when his roommate was the general manager of Boston Beerworks across from Fenway Park in Boston. Their head brewer turned him on to a homebrew shop in Cambridge, MA. He is a BJCP recognized judge and brews as often as possible.

We asked him to provide our readers with some of his insights to brewing with fruit and his article is a great starting point.

Sonoma County provides year-round access to a variety of seasonal fruit. It is the constant availability of high quality, local, fresh fruit that inspired me to start fermenting beer with fruit. I have never been a fan of most fruit beers traditionally available in brew pubs. Most follow the formula of taking a basic American Wheat Ale or Blonde Ale and adding a fruit flavoring of choice. These raspberry, blueberry, or peach flavored beers seem to persist on beer boards to satisfy the palates of the most entry level of craft beer drinkers. I have brewed the occasional version of this style and they can be quite enjoyable, particularly on a hot, summer day. But that is not what this article is about. Using fresh fruit to make beer is a completely different process and more challenging than adding a bottle of flavoring into your keg or bottling bucket.

Some variables to consider are the type of fruit, beer style, grain bill composition and desired end product. Do you want a sturdy version of a classic style with a hint of fruit flavor and/or aroma? Or are you going for a very fruit forward style with just enough beer character in the background to remind folks that it is not a fruit wine?

The first and most important question is the type of fruit you want to use. I have successfully used cherries, plums, apricots, figs, grapes and persimmons. These fruits all provide ample sugars, enticing flavors and balancing tannins to make fantastic beers. Following are a couple of general notes to help with the process:

- Invest in a refractometer so you know the sugar level of your fruit. Ensure that your sugar levels are ample.
- Leave the skins in so you pick up the tannins.
- I generally remove the pits; although the Santa Rosa Plum pits add a nice almond note.
- Freeze the fruit and thaw it out before utilization; this breaks down the cell walls and aids the yeast in fermenting out as much sugar as possible.
- Combine the thawed fruit and beer after primary fermentation has completed.
- Utilize between 1-2 lbs of fruit per gallon of beer. The mid-point is my preferred ratio.
- Add the fruit to the secondary fermentor and rack the fermented beer onto the fruit. You want to bring some yeast with you when you rack off your beer to ensure a robust secondary fermentation. I also recommend using at least a 6.5 gallon fermentor for secondary so you have adequate space for the fruit, beer and forthcoming krausen.

Combining your fruit with a compatible beer style is your next step. It is certainly fine to use a neutral blonde or wheat ale as the base beer for your fruit. This can make a refreshing quaffer and provide a good baseline of what to expect from the fruit from a beer sensory standpoint. I would recommend a neutral ale yeast as well for this style. Don't limit yourself to this formula however; fruit can be deliciously combined with many styles including porters, stouts, pale ales, IPA's, saisons, tripels and strong ales. A couple of notes regarding recipe formulation:

- Modify your grain bill to account for the effects of the fruit and secondary fermentation
- Utilize dextrin malt, carafoam, biscuit or honey malts to add body; very low final gravities are typical post-secondary fermentation.
- You might want to reduce your hop additions depending on your desired end product. Fruits with high tannin levels finish very dry and don't necessarily benefit from excessive hop bitterness. Do you want hop aroma or fruit aroma or both?
- Experiment with your yeast. Many yeast varieties produce esters that will enhance the fruit character of the beer.

Once your secondary fermentation is completed, rack the beer off of the fruit into another fermenting vessel. Let the beer set until clear. Lagering is the preferred method to drop out any lingering yeast and fruit particles. The fruit is usually decimated after a robust secondary fermentation. Bottle or keg as usual and enjoy with friends and family.

Cheers,
Sean O'Connor
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