

Is Beer Harder to Make than Wine?

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My first harvest season with The Beverage People was wine, wine, and more wine. Beer came up only rarely and then Byron or Nancy handled it. About the end of October, we suddenly entered beer season. Faced with the question “is beer harder to make than wine?” it seemed high time for me to find out.

As a reasonably experienced home winemaker—but beginning brewer—my answer is a resounding, “Yes, but...” Both are straightforward fermentations that have been carried out for thousands of years. Both also offer enough interest and complexity to allow (but not require) a formal university education and a lifetime of experimentation and learning. So what’s easier or harder?

Equipment. For wine (at least from fresh grapes) you need some specialized equipment as soon as you get beyond a couple of gallons. You can buy, borrow, or rent a crusher (or stemmer/crusher) and a press, but you will need them one way or another. To start with beer, equipment needs are much simpler. A large enough boiling kettle is about the only thing any home winemaker does not already have. A wort chiller is a great convenience and time saver, but not absolutely needed to begin. Both fermentations require fermentation tanks and aging vessels—usually plastic buckets and glass carboys to start. They have similarly complex (although completely different) bottling and stoppering equipment. So, advantage beer, for the smaller capital investment (or rent) to get started.

Sanitation. Both hobbies require careful cleaning and some sanitizing of equipment and utensils, but here it is clearly advantage wine. Wine’s high alcohol, high acid, and sulfite additions allow you to use the dusty grapes just as they come in from the vineyard—with no boiling! (I hear brewers gasping out there...) If you make a sanitizing mistake or get sloppy with your wine, you may not even notice. Do the same thing with your beer, and you’ll likely spoil it. At this stage, wine is easier.

Ingredients. When you make wine from fresh grapes, the fruit itself determines most of what you will be able to do. You can adjust sugar

or acid, control skin contact time, and so forth—but the grapes are the grapes. As a brewer, you can choose from among many malt extracts, grains, adjuncts, and flavorings. So when you make your beer, you have a much better chance of making the same beer again. To my mind, that makes the brewer's job easier in terms of achieving a desired result.

Preparation. You need to crush the grapes (and press them if you are making white wine). There is more work with beer, since you need to mash the grain (if not working with extracts), sparge the grain or dissolve the extracts, boil the wort, and cool it. Either task seems to take about a half-day, though, and leaves a mess to clean up. I'll call this one a draw.

Fermentation and aging. Because of the required contact with the grape skins, red wine is fermented in open vessels and mixed at least daily in some way. Beer can just rest in its closed fermenter (like a white wine does). Secondary is similar, but red wine is a lot messier and more work than beer because of the pressing off. After that, wine is stored in bulk and racked once every few months—easy work. Of course, beer is also easy at this point, just needing to be racked off, primed, and packaged. Advantage beer.

Enjoying. For the impatient, clearly advantage beer. With most types ready to drink in just a few weeks, you are way ahead of the months that most wines require.

Conclusion? Having tried both now, I consider wine easier—but by a very small margin. Beer's more extensive sanitation and required boiling are almost offset by its more precise control of ingredients. I know I'll be doing both kinds of fermentations for years to come and my view of "easier" or "harder" may evolve. If you've fermented one of these classic beverages, I recommend giving the other a try!

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