

Are These 7 Mistakes Killing the Taste of Your Beer?

Brewing beer is fun, challenging, and creative - plus you get to sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labors. However, for all the joy you get from brewing, there are times when things just don't go right. The beer might have a vinegary smell, an off taste, or it might be flat. A few critical mistakes are very common and can happen to anyone, whether it's your first batch or your fiftieth. Let's start with the most common and easily fixed problem.

Mistake #1: Not sanitizing equipment properly. In his book *The New Complete Joy of Home Brewing*, Charlie Papazian states: "The single most important factor in being able to make delicious beer is cleanliness. The more that you can minimize the chances of unwanted bacteria and wild yeast contaminating your beer, the better your beer will be." Bacterial contamination can cause a sour or tart taste and bad carbonation, and wild yeast contamination can cause a medicinal or plastic-like taste.

There are no known pathogens that can live in beer, so it's not going to kill you. (That is, if you can stand the taste of what was supposed to be beer.) Some brewers have less-than-sanitary conditions and turn out beer that tastes good, but taking the time to disinfect your equipment will boost your beer from good to *great*.

Most breweries do not sterilize, they sanitize. One of the cheapest and most effective sanitizers is plain old household bleach. Everyone has his or her own idea of how much to use, but one tablespoon of bleach per gallon of water will work. After soaking for a few minutes, *rinse thoroughly* – some brewers use hot water, some use cold. Bottles that have not been completely rinsed might have a small amount of disinfectant inside that could kill the yeast and the beer's carbonation.

Bleach can also clean your brewing gear. Soaking equipment and bottles overnight with a few ounces of bleach in water will get rid of any crud. If you have deposits around the necks of your bottles, try soaking them. You will be surprised how much better your

beer behaves and tastes. Pouring beer into dirty glasses can weaken the head, so make sure glasses are also clean.

The *Brew It Right Now!* ezine from May 2008 goes into detail on the proper way to sanitize your equipment. For a free subscription and more information about Downtown Home Brew, go to www.downtownbrew.com/ezine. As a bonus, you will have access to all back issues once you confirm your subscription.

Mistake #2 – Using stale or cheap ingredients. Ingredients can be expensive, and it's tempting to use less or to buy in bulk to save for later use. Don't do it - your beer will suffer.

—Stale hops can create beer with a weak head (or no head), and the taste cannot compare with beer made with fresh hops. Fresh hops or pellets should be green and should smell like...hops! If they have a cheesy odor, toss them.

—Yeast should be used within 3 months. Contaminated or old yeast can cause fermentation problems (too much or too little) or a vinegary smell. Contaminated or wild yeast can also ferment sugars that beer yeast cannot, which turns your beer into an interesting science experiment.

—Cheap malt may have foreign additives and preservatives that can ruin beer.

—Water should be of good quality and as low in minerals as possible to prevent a harsh taste. If in doubt, filter or boil it to get rid of impurities such as chlorine.

The *Brew It Right Now!* ezine regularly features the various beer ingredients, how to wisely choose and use them, and where to find them at reasonable prices. For a free subscription, go to www.downtownbrew.com/ezine.

Mistake #3: Wort is the wrong temperature before pitching yeast. A common problem is not cooling the wort down to a temperature of 70 to 80 degrees before adding (pitching)

yeast. If the wort is too cold, the yeast takes too long to begin fermenting. If it is too hot, the yeast might die. If the yeast is stored in the refrigerator, take it out two or three hours before using, as it should be room temperature when pitched.

Adding cold yeast to the wort (even if the wort is the correct temperature) stresses the yeast and can cause a long lag time before fermentation. You might need to pitch more yeast to get things going. To make sure the yeast is active, you can reactivate it by adding it to a cup of lukewarm water while the wort is cooling.

Mistake #4: Not following instructions to a tee. Brewing beer is a process that needs to be followed closely, especially for a newbie. Read the instructions a couple of times to familiarize yourself with the process and keep them handy for reference. Making beer is not the same as making a salad – if you try to brew from memory or make it up as you go along, you could end up with 5 gallons of stuff the dog wouldn't touch. If you follow a specific procedure, it is easier to determine what happened if something goes wrong.

In its Christmas 2007 issue, the *Brew It Right Now!* ezine gave a list of clear and concise basic instructions for Downtown Home Brew's most popular beer. For a free subscription, go to www.downtownbrew.com/ezine.

Mistake #5 – Using scratched plastic equipment. Plastic equipment should be scratch-free because bacteria are almost impossible to clean from scratched or stained surfaces. If you have contamination problems with beer brewed in plastic, this may be why.

There is some controversy about using plastic equipment. Some brewers say it is inferior to glass, while others believe that today's high-grade plastics are fine to brew with. Reconsider using plastic if you have older equipment or if your beer has a plastic-like taste. As you will see below, plastic equipment is fine to use for blow-off because it can seal and keep the system closed.

Mistake #6: Forgetting headspace for blow-off. Beer needs space to get rid of (blow off) excess yeast, gas, and foam. A common error is to fill the fermenter too full and fail to give this excess waste product somewhere to go. A blow-off tube with its own drip container will allow the waste to escape while keeping the system closed so air will not be able to get into the brew.

Every month, the *Brew It Right Now!* ezine contains a listing of manufacturers of blow-off tubes and airlocks. For a free subscription with access to all previous issues, go to www.downtownbrew.com/ezine.

Mistake #7 - Worrying too much. Yes, brewing is a science and there are certain procedures you should follow as closely as you can. However, part of what makes home brewing fascinating is that it is also an art. You are free to play with flavors, textures, and unusual add-ins to your beer. New brewers often worry about their beer to the point of obsession.

Brewing is supposed to be fun, not a stressful chore. The worst that can happen is that you cannot stand the taste of your creation, but that is what your friends are for – let them drink it. Relax and look at mistakes as a learning experience. Part of the joy of brewing is laughing at the blunders...and every batch of so-so beer brings you one step closer to Your Perfect Beer.

About Downtown Home Brew:

In 1993, Bev and John Miller started brewing at home, striving to create their perfect beer. Two years later they opened Downtown Home Brew, a restaurant and brewery with five locations in Colorado and Wyoming. It has become a national online and offline supplier of home brew kits, supplies, equipment, and ingredients and serves the beginner as well as the super-advanced home brewer.

Downtown Home Brew's new weekly ezine, *Brew It Right Now!* promises to show its subscribers the many ways to make their brew the best it can be. For an ezine subscription, or to browse the e-store, visit www.downtownbrew.com.

To get answers about your brewing questions, to order supplies by phone, or to subscribe to the newsletter by mail, call one of Bev and John's Brewmasters at 303-659-9877.