

CAMRA's Definitions of real ale

The definitions of real ale

Since the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) was formed in the early 1970s the world of beer has evolved to such an extent that it is now virtually unrecognisable in early campaigning terms. CAMRA has therefore sought to clarify its definitions of 'real ale' for today's world.

The solution has been to capture the common thread of all forms of 'real ale' in a new definition of 'live beer', before going on to describe the special characteristics of a "cask-conditioned beer".

Live beer

CAMRA defines a live beer as any that when first put into its final container contains at least 0.1 million cells of live yeast per millilitre, plus enough fermentable sugar to produce a measurable reduction in its gravity while in that container, whatever it may be.

Pointers to best practice:

- The purpose of retaining live yeast in a beer is to improve its flavour development while in its final container. A beer without live yeast will tend to be at its best on leaving the brewery, gradually fading as it loses freshness. In contrast, a living beer continues to develop character after leaving the brewery, in the case of most bottled beers for many months and in some particularly well-made stronger beers for a decade or more.
- The beer's carbonation and temperature at the time of serving should be appropriate to its intended style and format. A live beer conditioned in a broached cask will have relatively low carbonation, as the carbon dioxide gas (CO₂) produced escapes, while those conditioned in a sealed container, such as a bottle, can, keg or tank, will contain relatively high carbonation as the trapped CO₂ builds up in the beer. These are equally natural processes.
- It is acknowledged that a few strong and complex beers can improve with age solely through the action of slower yeast and other biological mechanisms, as occurs in some wines. While these are not always classed as 'live beers' this does not detract from their undoubted quality. For an extensive list of beer styles from across the world, visit: <https://www.ebcu.org/the-beer-styles-of-europe-and-beyond/>



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Cask-conditioned beer

CAMRA defines a cask-conditioned beer as a live beer that continues to mature and condition in its cask, any excess of carbon dioxide being vented such that it is served at atmospheric pressure.

Pointers to best practice:

- The aim of cask-conditioning is to complete a beer's maturation in the cask from which it is served, and to allow control of its carbonation level by venting. Leaving the beer to settle and develop for up to ten days before serving will round out its character and add a variety of subtly appealing flavours.
- Cask-conditioning is a long-standing feature of many British beers, including pale ales, mild ales, bitters, IPAs, porters and stouts. For technical reasons it is unlikely to improve the character of beers that are intentionally soured, or which have been extensively brewery-conditioned, such as authentically cold-conditioned lagers, or those aged for many months in wood.
- The best cask beers will be mashed mostly from malted barley, though adding a proportion of alternative grains, such as unmalted barley, wheat and others, to create different flavour characteristics is also acceptable. The use of simpler sugars or starches in the mash should be minimal and ideally zero.
- The hops used in the boil should be whole, compressed or pelletised (*1). Hop extracts or oil should be used only for fine balancing. By tradition the hop recipes in British cask beers are blends of different varieties, though a single hop recipe is also acceptable. Highly aromatic hops may lose some character in a broached cask. Dry-hopping, which is to say the introduction of fresh hops to the cask or fermenting vessel, is common and acceptable.
- Most cask beers in best condition will "drop bright" and be served clear due to the addition of "finings" – a fine protein film often derived from fish or egg protein – to the cask. Some modern cask beers are "unfined", mirroring older practice, often leaving the beer cloudy and less immediately appealing to the eye. While there are flavour differences between hazy and clear beers, each is equally authentic.
- The optimum level of carbon dioxide (CO₂), or 'condition', in an authentic cask beer is around 2 grams per litre, making



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110% saturation or 1.1 volumes per volume. For comparison, carbonation in bottled and other beer formats is typically 4 to 8 grams of CO₂, 200-400% saturation or 2.0 to 4.0 volumes per volume.

- To achieve optimum condition, casks should reach cellar temperature (11-14°C) before venting. Venting allows excess CO₂ to escape along with some other undesirable flavour elements. Cask beers need a minimum period of twelve hours after venting to stabilize, and some may require up to 4 days before this occurs.
- When beer is drawn from a cask, typically using a handpump or sometimes directly by gravity, it is normally replaced by air. Its oxygen content and some airborne micro-organisms can have deleterious effects on the flavour and keeping properties of the beer. Good cellaring practice will limit this. Replacing the air with a sterile inert gas at atmospheric pressure is permissible.

(*1) Hop pellets should be prepared from freshly milled, frozen hops in a cooled pelletiser.

CAMRA National Executive
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