

Brew Barrel – reviewing a beer kit

Something a little bit different for you. I've been sent a [Brew Barrel beer kit](#) to review here's a wee video where I test out how simple the kit is to use and next week I'll add another video of my review of the actual beer.

For those of you who are unable to watch the video, I've added my written review underneath.

Brew Barrel: My review



Brew barrel is a beginners level beer kit allowing people with no or very little experience to brew a beer at home. Basically it's dehydrated beer, just add water and stir. So if you can make a cup of tea, you can make beer using a beer kit.

There are two differences with this kit though;

1. that they claim your beer will be ready to drink in just 7 days. That's a big claim as a normal beer can take from 4 weeks upwards to be ready to drink,
2. you make and serve everything in one vessel, no need for separate fermenting buckets or bottles so it doesn't take up a lot of space. Unfortunately it's a mini kegs

which only holds five litres so at around £33 for this kit (including delivery), it's quite expensive per pint for homebrew.

So what was it like to use?

Well I have to say, pretty easy. The instructions are really well written and illustrated making them easy to follow. Given that it's a beginner kit, this also means you aren't having to get to grips with proper ingredients, there is a bottle of ready-made liquid extract in the box and some little bottles of hop extract/oil for flavour.

For me, I was a bit disappointed at the lack of options, but I'm someone who already brews and is used to being able to completely control my beers. I found it frustrating that there was no real detail of what you were buying. I got a pale ale, but don't know if it's a British or American version, also no idea what the bitterness level is or even what the alcohol percentage of the beer should be.

Looking at this through the eyes of a beginner though (which is their aim), I guess its a bout keeping things simple and taking away anything which could be seen as difficult or technical which might scare people off.

I did find a couple of things difficult, opening the little bottles of hop oil was a bit fiddly, they all had child proof caps and everyone knows adults can't open child proof caps. Also trying to push the barrel bung/vent into place was really hard but apart from that, really simple. You simple pour the liquid malt extract into the mini keg, top it up with specified amounts of hot and cold water, then add the yeast and hop oils and that's it. Leave it for a week and bob's your uncle.

I guess the big test will be next week when we taste the beer, so pop back then to see a full review.

Naming the pumpkin beer

It's time folks.



Your chance to vote for the name you'd like our pumpkin beer to have.

We've compiled all the suggestions we've received into a poll and we're giving you the chance to vote for your favourite.

The winner will be announced on the 27th November.

What should this year's pumpkin beer be named?

- Stingy Jack's (25%, 10 Votes)
- Thankful (18%, 7 Votes)
- Good Gourd (18%, 7 Votes)
- Jack's Harvest (15%, 6 Votes)
- Pumpkin Pie-nt (5%, 2 Votes)

- Pumpkin unparal-ale-d (5%, 2 Votes)
- Twisted Sisters (5%, 2 Votes)
- Pimpin' ma pumpkin (3%, 1 Votes)
- Pimpin Pumpkin Pinup (3%, 1 Votes)
- Samhain pumpkin ale (3%, 1 Votes)
- fómhar (Irish for Harvest) (3%, 1 Votes)

Total Voters: 28

 Loading ...

Learn to homebrew day – 5th November

The American Homebrew Association (of which I am a member) has declared the 5th of November as “Learn to homebrew day” formerly known as “teach a friend to homebrew day” so in the spirit of things, let me tell you about a fabulous first homebrew session we had with the Harpers.

Kirsty and Dan’s Christmas Beer

Kirsty and Dan (Dan is the one with the beard incase you hadn’t realised) are hosting their family christmas event this year and thought it would be a nice treat to have a homemade beer to serve. They are both beer fans as is Dan’s dad, so the idea for a bit of a brew with the Hodgeheg girls there for support seemed like a no brainer.



Step 1: Planning and formulating

The very first step in the whole process for the guys was to plan out what type of beer they wanted to serve at Christmas. Not all that difficult to decide as Dan is a complete hop head, meaning he likes very hoppy beers of the pale variety. Poor Kirsty didn't really get a look in. However on the plus side, this did mean that they had to sample lots of different beers so that they were able to discuss hop varieties and malt profiles.

This beer making malarky really is such hard work!

So yes, there was a lot of discussion about malt profiles, hop varieties, bitterness, balance, aroma etc etc. They tried a range of beers suggested by local Edinburgh beer geek and owner of the world's best bottle shop Peter Sherry from [The Beerhive](#) in Edinburgh and from this they came down to two beers that they liked, although each of them chose a different beer – ooh controversial.

The one thing both beers had in common was that they were of the american pale ale style, so at least that was a starting point, we now knew what style of beer the guys fancied brewing up. Also coming from this was a choice of hops, the guys decided they liked the fruity hops in the american style beers they tried so decided to go with Simcoe and Citra as their hop variety.

Warning

Now I feel it's my duty to talk about being sensible when you are drinking and not overdoing things and drinking too much, therefore this photo is to show you what can happen if you drink too much good quality, craft beer.



You run the entirely possible risk of being very happy!

Step 2: Recipe writing

So beers picked out, style chosen, hops chosen, now it was time to put together a recipe. That's where a little bit of help from myself came in.

If we were sticking to style for an American Ale, it would have very little in the way of malt. Pretty much it would just have plain malt and the hops would be the showpiece of the beer. However the beers that Kirsty and Dan chose were both British versions of American beers so they were both beers which had a good malt backbone as well as lots of hop profile. This meant that I worried a plain old American beer might be a little bit disappointing. Therefore I put together a recipe which had all the standards of an American pale ale but added a tiny bit of crystal malt for colour and a teeny bit of Munich for a little "something" in the background of the malt. To keep things nice and simple for a first time brew, we went with an extract recipe, that is to say that we used pale malt extract to make up the majority of the fermentables and added just a little bit of malt to boost the flavour and colour.

Unfortunately the local homebrew shop didn't have any of the Citra hops so Dan and Kirsty went crazy and substituted Citra with a relative newcomer called "Ella". Those two are just crazy I tell you.

Step 3: Brew Day

The big day arrived and we had great fun.

We drank beers (but not too many) and brewed with Kirsty and Dan doing all the actual brewing and me mostly drinking beer and ordering them around – oops I mean offering helpful advice and support.

There were a few small mishaps that we didn't foresee, like:



- the scales the guys had couldn't measure low enough for our hop additions – fix – we eyeballed it (not very scientific but the day was about learning the process of how you make beer not getting bogged down
- the boiler the guys owned died – luckily I brought mine
- Dan's tablet ran out of charge so we had to use smartphones to follow the recipe
- the guys had no tap and hose to connect a wort chiller to so we had to leave the beer in the back garden overnight to cool

We McGuyvered our way out of everything except one mishap – Dan poured a couple of litres of beer onto the floor – fix – Kirsty cleaned up!

All in all it was a fun evening and a great introduction to

brewing your own beer. So much so that the guys went out and bought some new scales – so watch out as I suspect there will be another beer on the horizon.

How to brew the Harper's "Beer for baby Jesus" American Pale Ale

This brew will make around 18 litres of beer (if you don't pour any on the floor).

Ingredients

- 3kg Pale Liquid Male
- 170g Crystal Malt 40L
- 60g Munich malt
- 100g Simcoe hops
- 100g Ella Hops
- Safale US-05 yeast

Equipment For this specific recipe

- A pot large enough to boil 25 litres of water
- Thermometer
- Muslin bags X 3
- Hydrometer
- Long handled Spoon
- Large vessel to ferment in – around 25 litres
- Sanitising solution

Method

This beer is brewed using a method called "Extract Brewing", it is a quicker, simpler method which requires less equipment.

To get going, heat 20 litres of water to 68 celsius then add the a muslin bag holding your grains. Make sure the grains all get soaked and then leave in the water to steep for 30 minutes. Dan had great fun doing this, he was in charge of the

spoon for prodding the bag, nuff said. Leave the bag soaking in the water for 30 mins so that all the colour and flavour will come out of the grains into your water. Don't panic at this point if it now looks like you are heating a pot of muddy water. Trust me the colour in the pot is nothing like the colour when the beer goes into the glass.

After your 30 mins are up, squeeze the bag a little to get all the good stuff out then discard.

Top up the water to 24 litres and set to boil. This is where the fun begins, you are now about to turn the water in your pot into something brewers call wort. Wort is the sticky sweet liquid that is the basis for beer. When it's ready, you'll "pitch" the yeast and the yeast will turn this sticky sweet liquid into beer. Brewers have a saying,

"Brewers make wort and yeast make beer."

Once your water or liquor as brewers call it is almost boiling, drain 8 litres and mix the liquid malt extract in. Make sure you really give it a good mix so that everything dissolves nicely before returning to the pot.

Congratulations now you have wort! You are now officially making beer.

The next thing we are going to do is to add some flavourings to the wort to make it more recognisable to the taste of beer we recognise. We are going to do this by adding hops to the liquid as it boils. The hops also have a further purpose, they are slightly antiseptic and help to preserve the beer.

Adding your hops or Hop additions in brewer's speak

There are three stages to this,

Bittering – the first hops to go in are to add a bittering element, this is to say that we are extracting the oils from the hops that counteract the sweetness of the wort in it's current state.

To do this, we add hops right at the beginning of the 60 minute boil period and we leave them there for the full boil. This extracts oils from the hop flowers and does sneaky science stuff to slightly change their make up which gives the beer it's bitterness.

So once the liquid is boiling add 5 g of Ella and set a timer for 45 minutes.

Flavour – near the end of the boil, we add more hops and because they are in the boiling liquid for a much shorter time the oils don't go through the same change and instead of adding lots of bitterness, they add flavour. When your 45 minute timer goes, you are going to begin adding your flavour hops.

At 45 minutes, add 5g of Simcoe and 5g of Ella. Set a timer for 5 minutes

On the next alert, add 10g of Simcoe and 10g of Ella, again set a timer for 5 minutes

On the next alert add 15g of Simcoe and 15g of Ella and set a timer for 5 minutes.

Switch the heat off and add 15g of Simcoe and 15g of Ella

Now you want to cool your beer down as fast as you can to around 18-20 celsius. You can do this buy sitting the pot in a bath of ice water

When wort is cooled transfer your beer into a sanitised fermenting vessel straining out any of the hops or debris in the wort. This is when you should use your hydrometer to take your original gravity reading (OG). Note it down as you'll

need it later to work out how alcoholic your beer is.

Add the yeast, cover and leave the fermenting beer somewhere which has a relatively stable temperature and out of the light.

Aroma – we add hops to the fermenting beer in the very late stages to add aroma. This will give your beer that fantastic smell when you open the bottle. The fact that the hops are going into the fermenting beer which is relatively cool in comparison to the boil and the fact it now has alcohol in it strips some more of the oils from the hop flowers and these oils make the beer smell lovely. It's called a dry hop.

Dry Hop

1. After the beer has been in the fermentor for 10 days, place all of the remaining hops into a sanitised muslin bag and tie a loose knot.
2. Use a sanitised spoon to poke this bag down into the beer and get it soaked – good and proper.
3. Leave for four days before removing, taking another reading with your hydrometer called your final gravity reading (FG) and bottle your lovely brew.

How to work out your alcohol

$$\% \text{ Alcohol} = ((1.05 \times (OG - FG)) / FG) / 0.79$$

So, given a few numbers suggested above:

$$OG = 1.045$$

$$FG = 1.008$$

The equation would look like this:

$$.0487 = ((1.05 \times (1.045 - 1.008)) / 1.008) / 0.79$$

So, this beer would be about 4.9% alcohol.

You have made your first beer. Enjoy it sensibly with friends and family.

Useful Videos

[How to use a hydrometer](#)

[Watch an extract brewing session](#)

If you fancy having a look at some of the pictures from their brewday, click on an image below for a larger version.







Chocolate milk stout - the holy grail of my home brewing

The last thing on our minds on a hot summer day is a thick, dark stout. On those days you dream of cold pilsner, or hoppy pale ales unless however, you are a brewer. Beers take time to make and to be ready to drink, they take time to research and to plan and then for the recipe



to be written and tweaked to be right. For brewers, this means that we are thinking about the stouts and festive beers we need to brew for Christmas in July, about summer beers come Thanksgiving. Even planning that Thanksgiving pumpkin beer in June. So this is why I found myself researching stout recipes for Mr Mo's chocolate stout in the sunshine of July.

Mr Mo's chocolate stout is a beer we make as our winter beer and in tribute to our cat who passed at christmas last year. Being a black or very dark beer and Elmo being a black cat it was a perfect complement. You can read more about this on the post about remembering him.

[Keeping Mr Mo with us.](#)

What is a stout, milk stout, chocolate milk stout anyway?

Stout is a dark beer, think Guinness. It has a deep, roasted barley or coffee like flavour but stouts are one of those beers which divide beer drinkers. They are heavy and have a lot of roasty flavours which are not to everyone's taste. Kate is a big coffee fan so she enjoys a good stout. I however hate coffee and so don't like those flavours in my beer.

Then I discovered milk stout. Now let me tell you about milk stout (or sweet stout), it's not a new fangled craft beer invention. Far from it. One of the most famous milk stout drinkers was in fact [Ena Sharples](#) of Coronation Street fame. It was the beer pregnant women were told to drink because "it does a body good" but the craft beer industry has made milk stout fashionable again meaning there are lots out there to try, not just good old "Sweetheart Stout".

Milk stout has less of the roasted coffee like flavours and has the addition of lactose sugar to make it sweeter. It can also have hints of vanilla, cream or chocolate coming through.

The big hit for me was the chocolate flavours and purely for research purposes I tested a lot of different milk stouts discovering that the levels of flavours varied greatly. One that I absolutely fell in love with was Lugene from Odell's brewery in Colorado. It is rich and has hints of vanilla and some of the chocolate elements coming through that I love. Especially after a pale ale, for some sciency reason, the pale ale makes it taste even more chocolatey.

So last year my emphasis was how do I get the chocolate flavours to be bold and really stand out in the beer?

This meant moving away from the coffee flavours that Kate likes, so as a compromise, we split the batch in two. To one I added some of Kate's favourite coffee to give her a coffee

milk stout and to the other batch ... well.

A lot of research and pootling on the interweb and I discovered that you could do this using roasted cocoa nibs. You sit the beer on them for a week or two to let the beer absorb all those lovely flavours. Yup, I went for a chocolate milk stout.

The cocoa nibs definitely helped with the chocolatey taste and smell but it still wasn't as good as the Lugene beer I'd fallen in love with, there was still too much roastiness for me. So, I emailed Odell, not expecting them to entertain me, but I actually got an email back giving me details of all the malts they use so I couldn't have asked for a better hint.



There was still some of the roast barley in their grain bill that gives the roastie flavours so I decided to try taking that out completely. That meant that this year's version of the beer is using that grain bill (just about) and I have to say I am really chuffed with the flavour. It doesn't have any of the roastiness that I don't like. It's not quite Lugene, it doesn't have the depth that their beer has but it's a definite improvement on my first attempt but I now know that the beer needs some of the roastiness to get that depth of flavour I want. You live and

learn.

Next year? Well next years focus is going to be on two elements;

- the beer's mouthfeel, and
- the depth of flavour.

At the minute my beer tastes thin compared to others so I want to focus on getting that silky mouthfeel I get from other milk

stouts and I suspect I am going to have to learn a whole new technique for next year.

With the depth of flavour, I am now suspecting that I need a little bit of that roastiness to balance the beer out so next year I will begin experimenting with how much roast barley to use to get just enough of that flavour.

It a lot of work and time to chase a perfect beer recipe – I started planning this beer in July, brewed it in August. It's now October and I've just had my first taste but that's the fun of being able to brew at home. I get to make beers the way I like them so it makes it all worthwhile.

So watch this space and I'll report back this time next year.