



2026

Best of Craft Beer Awards

Style Guidelines

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Overview

The 2026 Best of Craft Beer Awards will be held April 10th - 12th, 2026 and will award medals in up to 61 categories and subcategories. Judging is conducted blind; entries in the first round will receive feedback from each Judge at the table, and entries in subsequent rounds will receive feedback from the judging team. Gold, Silver, and Bronze medals will be awarded in each category unless Judges deem less than 3 beers are medal-worthy.

While we value the importance of style to communicate an expected flavor profile, we don't think a set of technical specifications encapsulates a delicious beer. Entries at the 2026 BOCBA will be evaluated to style with a preference for dynamic and harmonious examples over those with strict fidelity to technical parameters.

A *harmonious* beer is not just free of off-flavors or other technical flaws, it demonstrates skill in composition of the malt, hop, yeast, and water choices (and additional flavors, if any). Unless commonly accepted as part of a style's character, diacetyl, DMS, oxidation, acetaldehyde, acetone, astringency, autolysis, and sulfur are considered technical flaws. Drinkability and moreishness are favored over brashness or one-note experiences.

A *dynamic* beer is a tour of delights from sight to smell to taste to aftertaste and finish. Not just harmony in flavor composition, but across the different sensory experiences while drinking.

Additional Notes:

- **Unless explicitly allowed in the category description, fruited, flavored, or barrel-aged versions of traditional styles do not belong in the category for that traditional style.**
- Most categories will ask for more information about ingredients, objectives, and/or process than is typically requested by other national competitions. Entrants should provide a clear picture of the Brewer's intent for Judges to fairly evaluate an entry that may detour from traditional style descriptions. Competition organizers may edit information provided to remove details that could bias the Judge or identify the Brewery/Beer.
- Some of the broader categories list styles allowed and/or not allowed. These lists are not exhaustive (it should be understood that just because English Ales does not explicitly prohibit a Czech Pale Lager, such is not the right place), they are meant to reduce the most common sources of confusion.
- Any regional or national names in these guidelines could have "-Style" appended to clarify that the entries are not necessarily from that place of origin. We have omitted it because we think it's tedious to write and to read. "Berliner-Style Weisse" is just awkward, in or out of a competition.

2026 Competition Rules

1. Judging is conducted blind; competition organizers take precautions to minimize bias wherever possible.
2. A Judge who is affiliated with a brewery never judges a flight with that brewery's beer.
3. Preliminary round judging teams are scheduled with at least 3 judges, with 1 judge designated as the Table Captain. Judges form a consensus on advancing/medaling entries, with the Table Captain as the arbiter.
4. For all judging rounds after the preliminary round, judging teams are scheduled with at least 5 judges, with 1 judge designated as the Table Captain. Judges form a consensus on advancing/medaling entries, with the Table Captain as the arbiter.
5. Award categories must have at least 9 entries, and entry categories may be combined to form award categories at the discretion of the Competition Director.
6. Breweries may enter multiple different beers in a single entry category, but entering the same beer multiple times is not allowed in either the same category or multiple categories.
7. Entries must comply with all TTB regulations, and all specialty ingredients must comply with FDA guidelines as being GRAS (generally regarded as safe).

Collaboration Beers Award

We love the cooperative spirit of the beer industry. We've added an award category for collaborations to recognize that. Entries in this category will be judged at the same time as the rest of the main competition and evaluated as a Best of Show format from any of the below entry categories. Medals from this category do not count toward BotY points.

2026 Brewery of the Year Awards

- Brewery of the Year points are calculated by: gold = 6 points, silver = 5 points, bronze = 4 points. Total points are divided by the number of a brewery's entries.
- A minimum of 4 entries is necessary to be considered for Brewery of the Year.
- Breweries with multiple entering locations will have their medal and entry counts combined.
- Tiebreakers are : highest entry count in medaled categories, highest entry count in gold medaled categories.
- Brewery size is determined by 2025 barrelage. Small: < 5000 bbls, Medium: 5000-15000 bbls, Large: > 15000 bbls



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Entry Categories

Section A: Ales (Mostly)

Hop-Forward Ales

In categories 1-9, creative expression of hop aroma, flavor, and bitterness is rewarded.

01. Hop-Forward Session Beers

Under 5.0% ABV, copper or lighter in color. May include Session IPAs, IPLs, or hop-forward versions of other styles meeting the color and ABV criteria. Beers may be clear or hazy.

02. Pale Ale

5.1- 6.5% ABV , copper or lighter in color. Beers should be clear though hop haze is allowable. Aroma/flavor profiles from African, American, European, and Oceanic origin hops are acceptable. Hazy or juicy versions should be entered in Hazy or Juicy Pale Ale. English Pale Ales should be entered in English Ales.

03. IPA

6.6 - 8.0% ABV, copper or lighter in color. Beers should be clear though hop haze is acceptable. Aroma/flavor profiles from African, American, European, and Oceanic origin hops are acceptable, though English IPAs should be entered in Category 12. Hazy or juicy versions should be entered in Hazy or Juicy IPA. English IPAs should be entered in English Ales.

04. Imperial IPA

Over 8.1% ABV, copper or lighter in color. Beers should be clear though hop haze is acceptable. Detectable alcohol is allowable, but should not distract from the hop character. Aroma/flavor profiles from African, American, European, and Oceanic origin hops are acceptable. Hazy or juicy versions should be entered in Hazy or Juicy Imperial IPA.

05. Hazy or Juicy Pale Ale

5.1- 6.5% ABV, amber or lighter in color. Haze may derive from any source or technique, though it should not detract from appearance. Aroma/flavor profiles from African, American, European, and Oceanic origin hops are acceptable.

06. Hazy or Juicy IPA

6.6 - 8.0% ABV, amber or lighter in color. Haze may derive from any source or technique, though it should not detract from appearance. Lactose is allowable at low levels, but milkshake IPAs or other examples with prominent lactose character should be entered in Experimental Hop-Forward Beer & Other IPAs. Aroma/flavor profiles from African, American, European, and Oceanic origin hops are acceptable.

07. Hazy or Juicy Imperial IPA

Over 8.1% ABV, copper or lighter in color. Haze may derive from any source or technique, though it should not detract from appearance. Detectable alcohol is acceptable, but should not distract from the hop character. Aroma/flavor profiles from African, American, European, and Oceanic origin hops are acceptable.

08. Cascadian Dark Ale

Over 4.0% ABV, dark brown or darker in color. Roasted malt character should be present at low to medium levels and support the hop character rather than challenge it for dominance. Astringency or burnt flavors should not be present. Imperial versions should be noted as such in the base style for proper judging. Beers in this category should be hop-forward; Stouts or Porters with notable hop character should be entered in their respective categories. Aroma/flavor profiles from African, American, European, and Oceanic origin hops are acceptable.

09. Experimental Hop-Forward Beers & Other IPAs

This is a catch-all category for hop-forward beers which do not fit in categories 1-8. Brett, Brut, Cold, Kveik, Red, and White IPAs can go here. Wood, barrel, fruit, or other flavors are allowed at low levels but should be secondary to hop character. Imperial versions should be noted as such in the base style for proper judging.

Allowed:

- Brett IPA
- Brut IPA
- Cold IPA
- Kveik IPA
- Red IPA
- Rye IPA
- White IPA

Malt-Forward Ales

In categories 10-24, malt and grain character is emphasized relative to other ingredients even if it is not aggressively malty. Category 25 (Gluten-Free Beer) is included here though it is defined more by the absence of certain fermentables than their contribution to the beer.

10. Golden or Blonde Ale

Under 6.0% ABV, gold or lighter in color. A range of hop aromas, flavors, and intensities are allowable, but should remain secondary to clean malt flavors.

11. Kölsch

Under 6.0%, pale yellow to gold in color. Assertive carbonation to support head retention. Versions with non-Noble hops are acceptable provided hop intensity is in balance for the style.

12. English Ales

4.1- 7.0% ABV, pale yellow to dark brown in color. Malt complexity and depth should take precedence over hop intensity.

Allowed:

- English Summer Ale
- English Mild Ale
- Ordinary, Special, and Best Bitters
- ESB
- English Pale Ale
- English India Pale Ale

13. Scottish Ales

4.1- 8.0% ABV, pale yellow to dark brown in color. Malt sweetness is the defining characteristic; peat aroma/flavor is acceptable at low levels, but examples with more peat character should go in Smoke Beers.

Allowed:

- Scottish Light
- Scottish Heavy
- Scottish Export
- Lightly smoked/peated examples

14. Red Beers

Under 8.0% ABV, copper to reddish brown in color. Hop-forward examples are better suited to the Experimental Hop-Forward Beer & Other IPAs category. Darker examples may exhibit low roast character, but it should be secondary to caramelly, toasty, and/or nutty characteristics from malts with lower kilning regimens.

Allowed:

- American Amber/Red
- Irish Red
- Altbier
- American Amber Lager
- American Maerzen/Oktoberfest

15. Strong Red Beers

Over 8.1% ABV, copper to reddish brown in color. Imperial versions of Category 14 beers. Hop bitterness can be high to balance alcohol and specialty malt sweetness.

Allowed:

- Double Hoppy Red Ales
- Imperial Red Ales

16. Porters & Brown Ales

4.1- 8.0% ABV, light brown to black in color. American versions with elevated hop character are welcome, but entries should still be malt-forward. Hop-forward dark beers are better suited to Category 8.

Allowed:

- American Brown Ale
- American Porter
- English Brown Ale
- English Porter

17. Stouts

4.1- 8.0% ABV, dark brown to black in color. Roast, dark chocolate, coffee, and other highly kilned malt-derived flavors are the centerpiece. Examples with actual chocolate or coffee in them should be entered in those respective categories, and hop-forward examples are better suited to Category 8.

Allowed:

- Dry Irish Stout
- Sweet/Cream Stout
- Oatmeal Stout
- Export Stout
- American Stout

18. Imperial Porters & Brown Ales

Over 8.1% ABV, light brown to black in color. Detectable alcohol is allowable. Examples with actual chocolate or coffee in them should be entered in those respective categories, and truly hop-forward examples are better suited to Category 8.

Allowed:

- Baltic Porter
- Imperial Brown Ale
- Imperial Porter

19. Imperial Stouts

Over 8.1% ABV, dark brown to black in color. Roast, dark chocolate, coffee, and other highly kilned malt-derived flavors are the centerpiece. Detectable alcohol is allowable. Examples with actual chocolate or coffee in them should be entered in those respective categories.

20. Strong Ale/Old Ale & Scotch Ale/Wee Heavy

Over 6.1% ABV, amber to dark brown in color. Oxidation and other characteristics of aging are acceptable at low levels, but wood/barrel characteristics should be very low to absent. Versions with more prominent barrel characteristics should be entered in the appropriate Wood- & Barrel-Aged category.

Allowed:

- Strong Ale
- Old Ale
- Scotch Ale
- Wee Heavy

21. Barley Wines, Wheat Wine, & Rye Wine

Over 8.1% ABV, gold to brown in color. Both English and American barleywines go here, as well as variants incorporating wheat, rye, or other grains. Barrel-aged versions should be entered in the Strong Wood- & Barrel-Aged Beers category.

22. Rye Beers

This category is meant to reward ideal expressions of rye character in beer across base styles. ABV and color will vary, though examples with prominent hop, alcohol, or other flavors may fare better elsewhere.

Allowed:

- Rye Lagers
- Roggenbier
- Rye Stout

23. American Wheat Beers

This category accepts wheat beers other than traditional German Wheat Beers with their yeast signature. Examples with prominent hop, alcohol, or other flavors may fare better elsewhere.

24. Specialty Grains & Fermentables

ABV and color varies by base beer style. Beers which showcase grains and fermentables including (but not limited to): spelt, triticale, quinoa, frikeh, agave, honey, and maple syrup.

25. Gluten-Free Beers

ABV and color varies by base beer style. Beers entered in this category must be made with gluten-free ingredients; gluten-removed beers are not acceptable.

Fermentation-Forward Ales

These beers are defined by their fermentation byproducts, whether from *Saccharomyces*, *Brettanomyces*, *Lactobacillus*, or other bacteria.

26. German Wheat Beers

Beers entered here should have 50% or more wheat in the grist and POF+ yeast.

Allowed:

- Hefeweizen
- Kristallweizen
- Bernsteinfarbenes Weizen
- Dunkel Weizen
- Weizenbock

27. Belgian Ales

4.1- 7.0% ABV pale yellow to dark brown in color. Traditional spices such as coriander and orange peel are often integral to the nature of these beers but should be at subtle levels.

Allowed:

- Belgian Table Beer
- Witbier
- Belgian Singel
- Belgian Dubbel

28. Strong Belgian Ales

Over 7.1% ABV, gold to dark brown in color.

Allowed:

- Belgian Dark Strong Ale
- Belgian Pale Strong Ale
- Belgian Quadrupel
- Belgian Tripel

29. Spontaneous Fermentation Beers

5.1- 9.0% ABV, generally gold to amber in color though fruit or flavorings may produce different results. *Brettanomyces* character may be present.

Allowed:

- Lambic
- Fruited Lambic
- Gueuze
- Wild Ale

30. Classic Saisons & Farmhouse Beers

4.1- 8.0% ABV, pale yellow to amber. Strong saisons (higher than 8%) and examples with fruit or flavors should be entered in Category 31. Low level *Brettanomyces* characteristics are acceptable but should not overpower the primary fermentation profile.

31. Specialty Saisons & Farmhouse Beers

Fruited or flavored versions may produce non-traditional colors, and versions with higher ABV than typical are found here. Low level Brettanomyces characteristics are acceptable but should not overpower the primary fermentation profile.

32. German Sour Beers

4.1- 6.0% ABV, generally straw yellow to gold, though fruits or other flavorings may produce atypical colors. Traditional Berliner Weisses and Goses and their fruited/flavored counterparts are acceptable, though the base beer should still be identifiable and possess primarily lactic acidity. Beers with sufficient fruit/flavor content to obscure the base beer style should be entered in the Smoothie Sour, Fruit & Field Beers, or Flavored Beers categories.

Section B: Hybrid/Mixed

33. Rare & Historical Beers

A catch-all category for historical and modern beer styles with small market presence. Including but not limited to: Adambier, California Common, Kentucky Common, Kuyt, Pennsylvania Swankey, and Sahti.

Fermentation-Forward Beers

Entries in categories 34-38 have profound fermentation characteristics that relegate ale/lager considerations and often base beer style to the backseat. Breweries should provide information about process, ingredients, and/or objectives to paint a picture of the intended final product, but may elect to declare no base style at their discretion.

34. American Sour Beers

Kettle soured beers with or without fruits or other flavorings. Clean lactic fermentation characteristics are rewarded, as long as they are in balance with the beer's other flavors and not harsh. Any acetic character should be low; Brettanomyces character should be absent.

35. Smoothie Sour Beers

Beers with acidity, prominent fruit character, and lactose or other methods of increasing body. Ideal examples should not be boozy, but should still balance fermentation character rather than tilting too far toward a pure fruit smoothie.

36. Mixed-Culture Beers

Demonstrating fermentation characteristics from multiple bacteria and non-Saccharomyces yeasts. Entries may incorporate spices and/or other non-fruit flavorings, versions containing any fruit should be entered in Category 37. Barrel-aged mixed-culture beers are acceptable here.

37. Fruited Mixed-Culture Beers

Demonstrating fermentation characteristics from multiple bacteria and non-Saccharomyces yeasts in harmony with fruit characteristics. Barrel-aged fruited mixed-culture beers are acceptable here.

38. Brett Beers

Showcasing the expressions of Brettanomyces fermentation: barnyardy, fruity, leathery, and/or spicy. Acidity should be low; Brett Beers with significant acidity should be entered in Mixed-Culture Beers.

39. Non-Alcoholic Beers

Under 0.5% ABV.

Subcategories:

39A. NA Hop-Forward Beers. Copper or lighter in color. Non-alcoholic versions of hop-forward beer styles.

Allowed:

- NA Pale Ale
- NA IPA, including Black/CDA, Red, White, and other variants
- NA Imperial/Double IPA

39B. NA Dark Beers. Light brown to black in color. Non-alcoholic versions of dark beer styles.

Allowed:

- NA Brown Ales
- NA Porters
- NA Stouts

39C. NA Light Beers. Gold or lighter in color. Non-alcoholic versions of light beer styles.

Allowed:

- NA Golden Ale
- NA Kolsch
- NA Lager
- NA Light Lager

39D. NA Other Beers. Non-alcoholic versions of beer styles not already listed

Flavoring-Forward Beers

Entries in categories 40-48 should have as their showcase an ingredient or flavor other than is standard from malt, hops, water, or yeast/bacteria. For entries with multiple flavorings, entrants should choose among relevant categories based on which flavor is dominant or the highlight (e.g. A chocolate raspberry beer should be entered in Fruit & Field Beers if more raspberry-forward or Flavored Beers if more chocolate-forward).

Additional information about ingredients, process, and objectives is crucial to proper assessment by judges.

40. Fruit & Field Beers

Fruits and veggies are the star, though entries should remain identifiable as beer. Highlighting specific attributes of the ingredient and or creative combination of flavors is preferred over brute-force fruitiness. Pumpkin/squash beers with low or absent levels of spice should be entered here. Pumpkin Spice beers should be entered in Category 43. Some fruits and vegetables may display some natural acidity, but sour beers with fruit or vegetables added should go in categories 29, 32, 34, 35, or 36 as applicable.

41. Coffee Beers

Whether subtle or intense, fruity or roasty, coffee aroma and flavor should integrate into the rest of the beer instead of a discrete layer atop. Barrel-aged versions should go in the appropriate Wood- & Barrel-Aged category.

42. Smoke Beers

Rauchbiers, Smoked Porters, Grodziskie/Gratzer, and other beers with defining smoke or peat character should be entered here. Entries with other flavorings in addition to smoke should be entered in Experimental Beers.

43. Flavored Beers

Beers with flavors other than those covered by Categories 40-42 should be entered here.

Allowed:

- Herb and Spice Beer
- Chili Pepper Beer
- Chocolate/Cocoa Beer
- Pumpkin Spice Beer

44. Wood- & Barrel-Aged Stouts

Stouts aged in any kind of barrel or in contact with wood. No fruit, spices, or other flavorings added. Should a brewery wish to enter a non-imperial strength barrel-aged Stout, it will likely fare better in Category 46 due to the expected intensity of entries in this category.

45. Wood- & Barrel-Aged Specialty Stouts

Stouts aged in any kind of barrel or in contact with wood and with fruit, spices, or other flavorings added.

46. Wood- & Barrel-Aged Beers Under 8%

Low- and medium-strength beers with prominent wood/barrel character and no acidity should be entered here. Barrel-Aged beers with perceptible acidity should be entered in Mixed-Culture Beers or Fruited Mixed-Culture Beers regardless of ABV.

47. Strong Wood- & Barrel-Aged Beers

High-strength beer styles **other than Stouts** which feature wood/barrel character. May include beers with fruit, spices, or other flavorings added.



48. Experimental Beers

Beers which cannot comfortably be placed in another category should be placed here. Hybrids of two or more extant styles, Aged Beers, and other experimental ingredients or processes are appropriate. Barrel-aged Experimental Beers are acceptable.

Section C: Lagers

Malt-Forward Lagers

49. Light Lagers

Up to 4.5% ABV. Pale yellow or lighter in color.

Allowed:

- American Light Lager
- Contemporary American Light Lager
- German Leichtbier
- Tropical and International Light Lagers

50. North American Lagers

4.6- 8.0% ABV. Pale yellow to gold. Low fruity esters acceptable due to adjunct usage. Lagers above 8% ABV should be entered in Category 48.

Allowed:

- American Lager
- Cream Ale
- Malt Liquor
- Mexican Lager

51. Pale European Lagers

4.1- 6.0% ABV, pale yellow to light amber in color. A small amount of haze is acceptable. Low fruity esters contribute to overall flavor depending on yeast age.

Allowed:

- Czech Pale Lager
- Helles
- Festbier
- Dortmunder/Export Lager
- Kellerbier/Zwickelbier



52. Amber & Dark Lagers

4.1- 6.0% ABV, copper or darker in color. No chill haze in any style. All should present light malt sweetness, bready and toasted malt character.

Subcategories:

52A. Amber Lagers.

Allowed:

- American Amber Lager
- Czech Amber Lager
- Maerzen
- Vienna Lager

52B. Dark Lagers.

Allowed:

- American Dark Lager
- Czech Dark Lager
- Dunkel
- Schwarzbier

53. Bocks

Above 6.1% ABV, yellow or darker in color.

Allowed:

- Heller Bock
- Maibock
- Traditional Bock
- Doppelbock
- Eisbock

Hop-Forward Lagers

54. German Pilsner

4.1- 5.6% ABV, straw yellow to light yellow. No chill haze or DMS should be present. Dense, white head persists. Bready/biscuit-like aroma common, with moderate hop aroma and flavor due to late hop additions.

55. Czech Pilsner

4.1- 5.6% ABV, straw yellow to light gold. Low levels of sulfur and/or diacetyl are allowable. Moderate hop aroma and flavor due to late hop additions. Lightly sweet, biscuity aroma and flavor.

56. Hop-Forward Lagers

4.1- 7.0% ABV, straw yellow to gold. Lagers with low-medium hop character and above.

Allowed:

- American Pilsner
- Contemporary American Lager
- Contemporary American Pilsner
- India Pale Lager
- International Pilsner
- Italian Pilsner
- West Coast Pilsner

Section D: Fresh Hop Beers

Fresh Hop Beers are judged in-season at a separate judging event. For our competition, the term “fresh hop” is defined as newly harvested hops which have not been dried for preservation. Fresh hops may be used in any part of the brewing process, and dried hops or other hop products may be used in conjunction. Fresh hop characteristics can be described as green or grassy, though vegetal aromas or flavors are undesirable. Also common is fruit cocktail or other light fruitiness distinct from those aromas/flavors found in dried hops. The goal in all subcategories is the ideal expression of fresh hop character in harmony with the base beer.

57. Fresh Hop Beers

Aroma/flavor profiles from African, American, European, and Oceanic origin hops are acceptable.

Subcategories:

57A. Fresh Hop Pale Ale. 4.1- 6.5% ABV, copper or lighter in color. Beers should be clear though hop haze is allowable. Hazy or juicy versions should be entered in Fresh Hop Hazy Pale Ale.

57B. Fresh Hop Hazy Pale Ale. 4.1- 6.5% ABV, amber or lighter in color. Haze may derive from any source or technique, though it should not detract from appearance.

57C. Fresh Hop IPA. 6.6 - 8.0% ABV, copper or lighter in color. Beers should be clear though hop haze is acceptable. Hazy or juicy versions should be entered in Fresh Hop Hazy IPA.

57D. Fresh Hop Hazy IPA. 6.6 - 8.0% ABV, amber or lighter in color. Haze may derive from any source or technique, though it should not detract from appearance.

57E. Fresh Hop Imperial IPA. Over 8.0% ABV, copper or lighter in color. Beers should be clear though hop haze is acceptable. Detectable alcohol is acceptable, but should not distract from the (fresh) hop character. Hazy or juicy versions should be entered in Fresh Hop Hazy Imperial IPA.

57F. Fresh Hop Hazy Imperial IPA. Over 8.0% ABV, copper or lighter in color. Haze may derive from any source or technique, though it should not detract from appearance. Detectable alcohol is acceptable, but should not distract from the (fresh) hop character.

57G. Fresh Hop Lagers. 4.0 - 8.0% ABV. Lagers of any base style are acceptable.

57H. Fresh Hop Saisons or Sour Beers. 4.0 - 8.0% ABV, pale yellow to amber. Low level Brettanomyces characteristics are acceptable but should not overpower the primary fermentation profile or fresh hop character.

57I. Fresh Hop Beer- Other Styles. Fresh hop beers from base styles not otherwise specified.

Section E: Beer-Adjacent

We're a beer competition and not looking to make the event a catch-all for other beverages. However, as breweries diversify and innovate products that create beer-like experiences, we may add them here.

58. Hop Waters

Aroma/flavor profiles from African, American, European, and Oceanic origin hops are acceptable. Carbonation should be medium-high to high. May also include fruit or other complementary flavorings, but hop character should be prominent and pleasant without excessive astringency or off-flavors.