

Hoppy vs. Bitter

You're leaning on the bar gazing up at the beer list scrawled across the chalkboard. Other than a stout or two, all your choices contain those infamous three letters.

IPA.

But you don't like hoppy beers.

Let's admit it. We've all been there, bashing the craft beer staple, the IPA, because it's hoppy and bitter. Or is it bitter and hoppy? Or wait, aren't they the same thing? Before we silently - or not so silently - judge this misunderstood brew, maybe we should get our facts straight about "hoppy beers."

DOES HOPPY BEER MEAN BITTER BEER?

Well, when people say they don't like hoppy beers, what they usually mean is that they don't like bitter-tasting beers. People are used to using the terms *hoppy*, *bitter* and *IPA* interchangeably, but they're not the same things. Let's go ahead and break them down.

HOPPY

First of all, why do we need hops? There're actually a few reasons:

1. Hops act as a natural preservative in beer.

Add hops to your beer and it will last longer than if you don't. We could go into a bunch of detail here, but for now let's keep it simple.

2. Hops balance the sweetness of the malts/grains used in the brewing process.

All beers contain four basic ingredients: grains (often malted barley or *malts*), hops, yeast and water. Each ingredient plays a specific role in the brewing process. One of the things malts do to beer is add sweetness. To balance out this sweetness, brewers add hops.

3. Hops add flavor, aroma and, yes, sometimes bitterness.

The flavors and aromas hops add to beer are often tied to the region in which the hops are grown. German hop varieties which include the four *Noble hops*, are known for low bitterness as well as providing earthy, spicy and floral notes to beer.

Flavors and aromas range greatly from fruity to citrusy, piney to earthy, floral to black currant-y. So when we talk about “hoppy” beers, we’re often referring to the tastes and smells that various hops provide.

The timing in which we add hops during the brewing process plays a significant role in the effect of the hops, too. To add bitterness, the hops are boiled for about 60 minutes. Hops added 30 to 15 minutes prior to the end of the boil provide flavor. And hops added at the very end, 15 minutes or less to the end of the boil, or even completely after fermentation, add to the beer’s aroma.

And then, of course, sometimes the hops “outweigh” the malts, giving the beer a bitter flavor.

BITTER

The first thing we need to straighten out is to acknowledge that bitterness is not a bad thing. While it’s not a flavor commonly celebrated in American cuisine, the range of bitterness can still be enjoyed if you give it an open mind. When it comes to beer, again, bitterness helps to balance the sweetness of the malt/grains.

One acronym you may be familiar with when it comes to this topic is *IBUs*. IBUs or International Bitterness Units, is essentially a bitterness scale that measures the amount of isohumulone found in beer. Isohumulone is an acid imparted by hops.

So the more hops, the higher the IBU, the more bitter the beer. Right?

Wrong.

This is where **relative** and **perceived** bitterness come into play. (Just stay with me a little longer. I promise it’ll all make sense soon.)

Relative Bitterness

Remember that malt adds sweetness? Well, beers with a lot of malts require lots of hops to balance this sweetness. Think of malts and hops as two kids playing on the teeter-totter. They need to be relatively in balance with each other for either one to have a good time. Beer is the same. Beers with lots of malts, typically with a higher ABV (there’s another acronym for you: *alcohol by volume*), require more hops to balance out the beer (higher IBU).

So let’s say we have a beer that’s 50 IBUs and 5% ABV. This beer will have a similar bitterness, relatively speaking, to a beer that’s 80 IBUs and is 8%. Usually those high IBUs/ high ABVs come in the form of stouts, which require lots of malts, hence more hops. Overall, think of IBUs more as “IBHs” measuring *hops* rather than *bitterness*.

Perceived Bitterness

As with most things, bitterness depends greatly on the person. It'll depend on the foods you're used to eating, the flavors you're used to trying, basically what you've prepared your tastebuds to experience.

IPAs

India Pale Ales, IPAs, are the top growth driver in the craft beer industry. So they're pretty darn popular. That's why you find them in just about every brewery across America. What are they famous for? Their hoppy flavor and aroma. They're often seen as a "hopped up" version of your traditional Pale Ale. Within the realm of IPAs, we have a few other styles to mention:

American-Style India Pale Ale

Contrasting a relatively low to medium maltiness, the hop aroma and flavor of American-style IPAs is high, exhibiting anything from fruity to floral to sulfur/diesel-like, citrusy, piney or resinous characteristics. There's also typically a medium-high to very-high perceived bitterness.

Juicy/Hazy/New England IPA

These trendy, unfiltered IPAs are bursting with juicy, tropical fruity hop flavors and aromas while still maintaining a medium-low to medium bitterness.

Fruit & Milkshake IPA

With the addition of fruits and/or lactose, these IPAs tend to be sweeter with the fruit notes sometimes overpowering the bitterness while complimenting the hop flavors and aromas.

Brut IPA

This up-and-coming style sees an addition of an enzyme designed to ferment the beer to "0 plato." Basically what this means is no sugar's left in the beer after fermentation. It's still a heavily hopped beer that provides a dry, crisp, bitterness with nice hop flavors and aromas.

TAKE-AWAY

To wrap it all up, IPAs are known for being hoppy beers. Yes, hops can lead to bitterness, but they're so much more than that! A "hoppy" beer is often defined by its flavors and aromas, be that piney, grapefruity, woody, spicy or resiny.

To get the most out of your “hoppy” beer tastings, consider asking yourself these questions:

- What style is the beer? *American-style IPA? New England style?*
- What variety/varieties of hops are used? *Am I detecting some spicy Noble hops in this brew?*
- How are the hops used/when are they added in the brewing process? *This is a pretty bitter beer. I wonder if the hops were added early in the brewing process?*
- Are there any other ingredients added to the beer (fruit, lactose, etc.)? *Grapefruit IPA? Yes, please!*

Now go expand your palate and try some hoppy beers. Or some bitter ones. Or how about both? Cheers!

Sources:

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