

The Problem With Guides to Beer Drinking

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There Just Aren't Enough

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For newcomers to wine, it's easy to find a guide to follow, but good luck finding their equivalents when it comes to navigating the world of beer



America is a beer-drinking country -- we consume about 10 times as much per capita as wine -- but you'd never know it from the state of beer-related journalism. Most newspapers have a wine columnist, but few have a part-timer for beer; the New York Times turns to its wine writer, Eric Asimov, for the occasional write-up. That's not to say there aren't great beer writers, or great beer magazines, books, and blogs. But compared with wine, they're few and far between -- and, to put it as kindly as possible, not exactly aimed at the mainstream, non-beer-obsessed public.

This is a problem, especially during the current craft-beer renaissance. Newcomers to wine can follow a reliable guide like Asimov or the Wall Street Journal's Lettie Teague; good luck finding their equivalents (i.e., deeply knowledgeable but layman-accessible) in the world of beer. And while it's possible to find entire shelves of authoritative books on the Napa wine scene or the history of cabernet sauvignon, anyone looking for a comparable resource on brown ales or wet-hopping will find, at best, an ever-changing Wikipedia page.

The book is precisely what a companion should be: an engaging, subjective, erudite guide to the interested novice and a quick reference for the initiated.

Which is why the Oxford Companion to Beer was so highly anticipated in the months leading up to its publication -- and why it has been so viciously criticized upon its arrival. Edited by Garrett Oliver, the brewmaster at the Brooklyn Brewery, the book includes more than 1,100 entries by 166 contributors, covering everything from acrospires (the tiny sprouts that grow out of grain seeds) to the Zatec hop

region in the western Czech Republic. Like other books in the Oxford University Press "companion" series, this is decidedly not encyclopedic: As Oliver makes clear in the introduction, while this is arguably the most comprehensive book on beer, it is by no means all-encompassing.

Nevertheless, online critics have made an intramural sport of identifying the book's omissions. There's no entry on Oregon's Deschutes Brewery, nor is there one for Avery or Stone, all three of them powerhouse craft breweries. Such absences would matter more if the book pretended to objective universality; as a companion guided by Oliver's subjective perspective, their absences are points for debate. Deschutes makes great beer, but is it important enough to the history and culture of beer that it warrants its own entry? Reasonable people can disagree, but Oliver clearly doesn't think so. The book, already 920 pages long, can only be so big.

More trenchant criticisms have come in the form of attacks on the Companion's accuracy, often under breathless headlines like "The Oxford Companion to Beer: Juggernaut or Dud?" and "A Dreadful Disaster?" There's even an unofficial Wiki for errata and clarifications. Many of the critics, like the British beer writer Martyn Cornell (who is, awkwardly, a contributor to the book), really know their stuff, and have identified several mistakes. Some of them are quibbles with language, some are outright errors.

Except for baseball fans, few groups get as worked up over details as beer geeks, so I'll set aside the relative importance of such errors to others. Cornell clearly thinks they matter; he nearly has a coronary while writing that "the lack of proper research shown by even the small number of examples I've quoted here, and the repetition of inaccuracies that they represent, threaten to wipe out much or all of the advances that have been made over the past 10 or so years in getting the history of beer into proper, accurately researched shape." (Presumably he doesn't mean the entries he wrote himself.) But what I find striking is how relatively few errors have been identified in the weeks since the book has been out. The Wiki has only about 40 entries, and most of them deal with matters of interpretation. In a book that may have upwards of 100,000 factual statements in it, the presence of a few dozen errors, while regrettable, is pretty impressive.

It's a shame that would-be critics have spent their entire time fact-checking the precise rules of the Royal Court's brewing guidelines under Henry VIII (subject of one catch), because they've overlooked the achievement of the book as a whole -- though, given their vehemence, it's a good bet they weren't going to give it a chance in any case. Thoroughly illustrated and beautifully typeset, the book is precisely what a companion should be: an engaging, subjective, erudite guide to the interested novice and, at the same time, a quick reference for the initiated. As a dedicated drinker all but ignorant of the chemistry behind brewing, I feel I've already learned a lot -- and I've only read through the five entries that start with "acid-."

One thing lacking in the Oxford Companion to Beer is any guidance on where to actually find the stuff. Fortunately, Christian DeBenedetti provides a useful, if necessarily incomplete, guide in his *The Great American Ale Trail* (for which Oliver somehow found the time to write the preface). A young and talented beer journalist, DeBenedetti provides extensive descriptions of beer bars, stores, breweries, brewpubs, and restaurants with extensive beer lists (11 Madison Park, one of Manhattan's toniest eateries, also boasts one of the country's best beer inventories). Tucked between are travel itineraries, regional overviews, and general musings about the culture of beer in America. What could have been a dry mash note to the nation's beer havens is, in DeBenedetti's hands, a fluid, entertaining handbook.

That said, like any travel book, this one is defined and thus limited by DeBenedetti's interests and experience. Anyone who picks up the *The Great American Ale Trail* can think of a bar that was wrongfully overlooked. There's the breaks: this is a guide, not a directory. Still, it's frustrating to see large swaths of the country left out completely. Yes, the best bars and breweries may be in Oregon, Colorado, and New York, and they deserve coverage. Then again, anyone passingly familiar with craft beer will know that if you find yourself in Bend, you absolutely have to visit Deschutes. How many know, on the other hand, that Wilmington, North Carolina, has a robust beer-bar scene?

There are also some suspiciously impersonal write-ups of several out-of-DeBenedetti's-way spots, which make a reader wonder if he actually visited them in person. His sole entry for Tennessee is the Yazoo Brewing Co., with a fine and fun taproom that he mistakenly says is open just for growler fills (that's only true on Wednesday; Thursday through Saturday it's open for pints). He also implies that Sue -- Yazoo's sublime, 9-percent-ABV smoked imperial porter -- is available on site; in fact, because Tennessee law restricts the sale of beers about 6.25 percent ABV to liquor stores, you won't find it at Yazoo. You also won't find DeBenedetti discussing any of Nashville's other great breweries and bars, including Blackstone and Boscós, both of which boast chestfuls of beer-festival medals.

One could argue that, as nice of a beer city as Nashville is, it simply doesn't stand up to the likes of Brooklyn or Boulder. And that would be right -- all the more reason it should be more thoroughly covered in DeBenedetti's book than it is. You can't swing a hipster in Williamsburg without hitting a bar with a decent row of taps. But even a connoisseur might need help finding a good list in Carolina Beach, North Carolina, a town left out of *The Great American Ale Trail* (check out the Fat Pelican, which has a self-serve walk-in fridge full of craft beers).

In other words, DeBenedetti and Oliver's books are similarly incomplete, yet still impressive in their overall depth and scope. More exciting, still, is that their success opens the door to future beer books that might drill down on, say, the top 50 American breweries or the best watering holes in the Southeast. Beer writing may be empty territory, but don't expect the drought to last.

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