

Homebrew, for the complete amateur

Contributed by fallscape

Downsizer member fallscape shows you where to start...

Brewing is by far the easiest craft, as it only requires about an hour of your time (if you're taking it really easy) and gives you a relatively generous payback.

Let me begin by telling you a bit about beer-making.

Beer is traditionally made from the following ingredients:

- 1.) grain
- 2.) water
- 3.) hops
- 4.) yeast

Nothing else is really needed to make something alcoholic and tasting nice.

Generally the process is difficult to do from scratch - but I'll give you an overview.

First after selecting your grain, hops and yeast type, you need to make a wort. A wort is a sticky syrup that feeds the yeast. The yeast breaks down the wort into CO₂ and alcohol. Mmmm.

To make a wort you need to malt the grain. This involves getting the grain a bit damp so it begins to sprout. This converts the seed's natural store of energy into a more useful sugary content. We then crack the grain and roast it. This is a fairly skilled job and requires a fair bit of equipment to do easily - it's not impossible and I'm sure a few Downsizers will be sitting at home having malted and roasted their grain, and will be finally hitting it with a hammer about now.

Next comes the sparging. We spray/pour boiling water over the grain and the sugars dissolve. They pour into our fermenting bin. We use a hydrometer (check out the article on hydrometers) to measure the gravity (how much sugar is dissolved affects this) and water down to a relative level and leave to reach room temperature-ish. We have wort!

Of course you can do this all yourself with a bit of experimentation and imagination. There are loads of ways to arrange your batch sparging etc - but it's a bit out of scope for this easy-brew guide.

So how do you do it easily?

Well you can buy a kit.

Kits come in many different shapes and sizes. If you want a good no-hassle kit, you need to look for something like a Woodforde's kit. They're available for around £15 and produce 40 pints (I like wherry). That's 38p a pint.

If you're looking in the lower ranges (£8ish) you'll notice the kits are smaller - only one tin. This is because they expect you to make up the mixture with loads of sugar. You don't have to - you can add half the water suggested and the yeast to make a fairly respectable brew. Refined sugar as would be found in the supermarket will make a big impact in taste and smell. I generally avoid it like the plague, though some people get perfectly good to excellent results. Some manufacturers offer SME kits - Sprayed Malt Extract. This stuff is basically what you get in the tin, but has been dehydrated to save on shipping costs. It's far superior to sugar. It also tastes like Maltesers.

You can also get entirely dry kits - just SME, yeast and hops.

The hops add flavouring. With kits such as Woodforde's you'll find they're already hopped and there's nothing to do. With other brands you'll find they'll give you a packet of hops in a teabag-like vial. You throw this in with the wort to add the flavour during the brewing. Often the cheaper packs aren't hopped or have been badly hopped. You can solve this with boiling.

The boiling aspect of brewing involves sticking your entire brew on the hob, in a massive saucepan and boiling it till it reaches a 'hot break'. That's basically when all the suspended rubbish in the brew floats to the top. It occurs shortly after boiling starts. The trick is then to reduce the temperature in the brew to force a 'cold break'. Then skim off all the rubbish. To me, this hassle isn't worth it. I stick with a more expensive kit like Woodforde's, which I'm going to explain now.

Woodforde's brew

Equipment required

To buy:

- brewing spoon (very long handle)
- fermenter (food grade 'bin')
- bottles

- caps
- capper
- sterilising powder
- plastic syphon tube
- Woodforde's kit
- racking cane (hard straight tube)

Hopefully you'll already have:

- soft cloth
- tin opener
- thermometer
- teaspoon
- kettle
- water
- tea towel

Using the soft cloth, clean everything.

Then sterilise all your equipment. Anything touching the brew needs to be sterile! Bottles, caps and siphon can be done during the bottling stage.

Pour the contents from the cans into the fermenting bin. Wash the cans out with a little boiling water, use the tea towel to hold them, they get hot! (Don't forget to recycle them!)

Fill the bin with 3 litres of boiling water. Add cold up to the 40 pint mark, stirring continuously.

Aerate. This means shake it up a bit. I find pouring the water from a height does a good job when you're filling it. Otherwise hope you've got a (sterile) lid with yours and give it a good shake.

'Pitch' (pour in) the yeast.

Yep, that's it. The beer is 'brewing'. Keep it warm and just leave it for a couple of weeks. It's best to cover the top of the bin with either a clean tea towel or a lid. Follow the instructions for your barrel's lid if it came with any.

When two weeks have passed, the foam on the top will either have started to or will have sunk in. Bubbles will have stopped rising from the tub as far as you can see. Next comes the really messy bit if you're unprepared. Get a second person to help.

Wash and sterilise everything.

Add 1/4 teaspoon of Demerara sugar or SME to each bottle.

Next get the fermenting bin in a high place. Attach the racking cane to the siphon tube. Then start the siphon without using your mouth. Your mouth has loads of bacteria in it which will ruin your brew. I fill my tube with sterilising solution and very carefully with my sterile thumb over it lower the other end into the bin. Releasing my thumb empties the solution onto my feet or into a bowl if I'm being careful, dragging the beer down the tube. The second person just needs to make sure that the tube stays submerged in the beer (for that is what it is now) and you have to keep your end lower than the bottom of the barrel, and preferably in a bottle.

Clamp the siphon by turning itself back on itself with your hand. You can then control the flow!

Now fill the bottles.

Cap the bottles - follow the instructions on this - make sure the caps are sterile!

Leave for another three days in the warm to start your secondary fermentation in the bottle. Then turf outside into the garage, cellar or other cool place to clear. The brew will be ready in 7 days - it'll be quite green and fairly off-putting. The longer you leave it, the better it gets. A really cold snap over a few days will kill the yeast inside and it will drop to the bottom of the bottle. It looks horrible but won't do you any harm. When pouring, I prefer to leave the last 1cm or so with the crud in the bottle.

FIN!

Generally the best time to make ale (a winterish drink to me, though I drink it all year round) is Summer.

The process for making lager is similar, except it needs to be kept really cool during fermentation to provide the crisp clear flavour. I've not made a successful lager yet - they're generally er... well, ales at the end.

The nice thing about bottling is that you can make a lot of beer and drink it yourself. You recycle bottles and will find the first few brews difficult as you'll be rummaging around in recycling bins to

gather them. Some are better than others - the best being the old flip-style Grolsch bottles. I'd sell my Mum for some of those.

The initial outlay is quite expensive, but if you were to buy 40 pints (of ale) in the supermarket you'd immediately recoup the costs.

In this little tutorial you will have made a successful beer (hopefully).

You didn't:

Mess with hydrometers at all

Had very little to do with temperatures

Didn't do much to flavour the beer

Probably got very drunk after you successfully completed it

Reused bottles – so very environmentally friendly.

Brewing isn't that complicated. Yes, it is to make something from scratch, but this is a good place to start with good end results to encourage you further. Some people don't progress further than ready-made kits – it's not something to worry about and you're making savings.

If you do start measuring you'll be able to work out the alcohol content and how to make it better – keep a brewer's diary.

You can get a wealth of information from the forums on Downsizer.net or the rec.crafts.homebrewing on Google groups (or your favourite newsreader) with plenty of experts to help. Enjoy!

Any other tips, complaints etc., feel free to address them to me via our forums. – Have a lot of fun.