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# The Art and Science of Aging Beer

By: [Stephanie Vermillion](#) | Updated: Apr 7, 2021



More brew enthusiasts are dabbling in the art of aging beer. Aging not only can changes the flavor profiles of certain beers, it also helps people learn about how beer is made. **STEPHANIE VERMILLION**

A cold, fresh [beer](#) is tasty and all, but have you ever tried one that's perfectly aged in a basement beer cellar?

That's right. Just like wine collectors age their wine, more brew enthusiasts are dabbling in the art of aging beer. In some cases, the multiyear-old beer tastes subtly better. In other cases, it's entirely undrinkable. That's the fun of this increasingly popular hobby; you, the beer-ager, become part of the beer-production process. Ingredients in certain

beers can change with age, giving beer collectors the freedom to play with flavors and tweak beers to their liking.

"The beers we want to age are beers that for one reason or another may develop in interesting ways as time goes on," says Eric Dunaway, lead beer buyer for [Jungle Jim's International Market](#), which sells more than 4,000 different types of beer in southern Ohio. "Malt flavors may change or develop. Fermentation flavors may increase over time. And, if the beer is in fact barrel-aged, that may become more apparent when aged."

True beer aging is more than simply throwing beer on a shelf and forgetting about it. It's a science. It takes practice, experimentation and the willingness to mess up — and then start again. That said, there are some ground rules when it comes to aging beer.

## What Beers Age Well?

Dunaway says it's best to avoid aging hoppy beers like IPAs because hops are quite volatile. "The aroma and flavoring that hops provide to a beer are actually a result of the most fragile elements of the hops," he explains. "[Hops](#) will be the first thing to sort of fall apart in the beer. You should drink these [beers] as fresh as possible."

The beers that do age well fall under the "wild beers" category. This includes anything aged by wild organisms — think Flanders Reds, lambics and barrel-aged American wild ales. Malty beers like quads, barleywines and imperial stouts are also good candidates for aging. "The malt flavors can often change in really fun and interesting ways," Dunaway says. Sours also are good candidates because they tend to get more sour as they age.

Alcohol plays a part, too, and the higher the [alcohol content](#) (7 percent or above typically), the better a beer is for aging. Celebration or Christmas ales are also good for gaining.

The beer will change depending on several things: its style, complexity and flavors. Some beers will become more dry, while others will taste yeastier or lose their sweetness

over time and become more complex.

No, this isn't your local beer store. This is the collection of a beer-aging enthusiast. He uses a color-coded sticker system to denote when each bottle was first placed in the cellar for aging.

STEPHANIE VERMILLION

## Beer Aging Is Part Fun, Part Failure

Enjoying a good beer is easy, but aging it? That's where things get trickier. According to Dunaway, there's no hard and fast rule for when an aging beer is ready to be consumed. It comes down to trial, error and unfortunately, a lot of wasted beer.

"If all you want to do is drink a tasty beer, then there's no need to age beer at all — just drink all the fresh beer you want," Dunaway says. "The purpose of aging beer is to gain a better understanding of how beer works."

Beer aging is like a grown-up science experiment. Dunaway recommends buying multiple bottles of the same beer, drinking one fresh bottle, then logging notes about the fresh one so you can revisit and compare tastes with the other aged bottles in the future. "If you only buy one bottle of something and you age it for two years, well, it might taste

awesome, but you have no idea if it changed or not — or if it changed for the worse," he says.

This beer log doesn't have to be pen and paper. There's an app for that. [Cellar HQ](#) capitalizes on the beer-aging trend with a user-friendly interface that make beer organizing easy. You can add personalized beer reviews and scan in new brews with the UPC to keep tabs on what's working and what's not. Other beer collectors swear by a color-coding methodology, using specific stickers for each year to track when brews were purchased and, more importantly, when they're ready for drinking.

Unfortunately, there's no set science for when an aged beer is ready. You can age some beer for months, and some beers for years and even decades. But Dunaway does have a few timeline tips to keep in mind.

"Among the styles of beer that are age-worthy, some are more age-worthy than others," he says. "If you have a Belgian Triple that's 2 years old, I wouldn't think anything of that. It's probably still drinking great, but I don't think it will last a decade. On the other hand, I've had English barleywines that were 15 years old and were still fantastic."

## **Storage Is Key**

Just like wine, aged beer needs to be kept in mild conditions — not too hot, not too cold. (The latter slows down or halts the aging process.) Instead of stowing bottles on their sides like many wine collectors, Dunaway suggests storing bottles upright to avoid unwanted flavor manipulations.

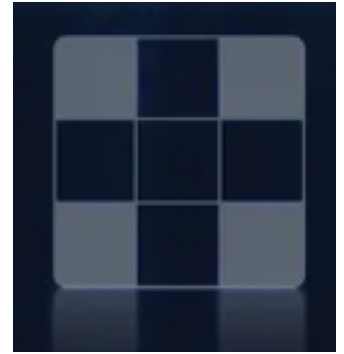
"If you turn it on its side, all of that yeast is going to settle along the entire side of the bottle instead of being concentrated at the bottom," he says. "This changes the surface ratio of how much beer is exposed to the yeast. You can end up with some weird things where the yeast starts eating sugars that it otherwise wouldn't. You end up with bottles that are over-carbonated or take on weird fermentation flavors."

## Now That's Interesting

A climate-controlled cellar has nothing on the ocean floor. In 2010, Finnish divers uncovered crates of intact wine and beer from a 200-year-old shipwreck on the floor of the Baltic Sea. The result? The wine tasted fresh with clear acidity and the beer frothed up perfectly, indicating the yeast was somehow still alive.

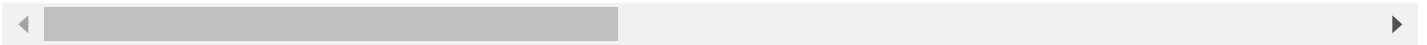
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