

BREW

Raise the bar for a better ale

Tough standards at the Sydney Royal Beer Competition can only be good for the industry, writes **Willie Simpson**.

In earlier times it was common practice for breweries to enter their beers in agricultural shows where their merits would be judged and medals were highly prized.

The practice fell away in the latter part of the 20th century when the progressive consolidation of ownership in the Australian brewing industry meant there was far less competition of any sort.

Now the wheel has turned once more, with a resurgence in craft breweries reflected by the fact that three states' agricultural societies will stage beer competitions this year.

Melbourne's Australian International Beer Awards is a combined effort between the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria and the University of Ballarat, while the RAS NSW held its inaugural beer competition last month and the 2007 Perth Royal Beer Show will be judged in late March.

Each competition features quite different entry criteria, with the Melbourne show

open to all comers, the Perth event limited to beers commercially available in Australia (with a separate category for home brewers) and the RAS NSW competition is limited to Australian bottled beer only (though it may be opened to draught beer in future).

Competitions, though they seem to attract more controversy than mozzies at a picnic, should be a boon for local craft brewers.

For the RAS event, there was a deliberate policy to establish a competition that was relevant to the brewing industry and distinctly different from other similar competitions.

It falls under the umbrella of the Sydney Royal Fine Food Show, where everything from coffee, cupcakes, branded beef and oysters are judged, so why not beer? The scoring system and overall model is drawn, largely, from the successful Sydney Royal Wine Show.

That means a beer must score at least 90 points out of 100 to win a gold medal, with the bar set considerably higher than the other two beer competitions (where 17/20 points wins gold). This year's competition attracted 95 entries and although roughly half won medals. No gold medals were awarded.

All other beer competitions held in Australia and New Zealand simply lift their style categories directly from the US Brewers Association guidelines, but for the Sydney version the RAS opted for much broader categories (also based on the wine show model).

Most shows have separate divisions for large and small breweries and categories for low-alcohol beers, but all entries at the Sydney beer competition were judged in the same general categories.

Some fine-tuning will be in order for next year but, overall, the beer competition was a smoothly run and much-needed addition to the Sydney Royal Fine Food Show.

Willie Simpson was a judge and consultant to the RAS NSW and the 2007 Sydney Royal Fine Food Show.



Photos: Sophie Granger

RESULTS RAS NSW 2007 BEER COM

ENTRIES 95
GOLD MEDALS 0
SILVER MEDALS 13
BRONZE MEDALS 35

MEDAL WINNERS (NSW BREWERIES ONLY)

SILVER
 Hahn Premium Lager, Tooheys Extra Dry, Nirvana Pale Ale (Murray's Craft Brewing), Redoak Brown Porter, Redoak Opera Bar Blonde, Redoak Organic Weizen Doppelbock, Redoak Baltic Porter.

BRONZE
 Black Wa
 Bluetong
 Bock, Hu
 Tooheys
 James S
 Golden A
 James S
 Sassy Bl
 Northern
 Vienna L
 India Pal
 Redoak
 Dark Bie
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Liquid gold? ... judge Brennan Fielding.

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BRONZE

Black Wattle Ale (Baron's Brewing), Bluetongue Traditional Pilsener, Hunter Bock, Hunter Pale Ale, Hunter Kolsch, Tooheys New, Tooheys Old Black Ale, James Squire Pilsener, James Squire Golden Ale, James Squire Porter, James Squire Rum Rebellion Porter, Sassy Blonde (Murray's Craft Brewing), Northern Rivers Pale Ale, Redoak Vienna Lager, Redoak Rauch, Redoak India Pale Ale, Redoak Oatmeal Stout, Redoak Organic Hefeweizen, Schwartz Dark Bier, Bullocks Pilsner (Snowy Mountains Brewery), Three Sheets (Lord Nelson Brewery Hotel).

Full results, see www.rasnsw.com.au.