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15 MINUTES

BY MAXFIELD MORRIS

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This is the face of a Grand Master beer judge.

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Beer, meet your judge

Where others chug beers and swig meads without so much as a second taste, **David Teckam** pays attention. Traversing seas of ales seeking flavor notes; throwing a lackadaisical gaze at the sunset array of colors; and finding strategically placed needles in haystacks, Teckam is a beer judge. Specifically, he's a **Grand Master Judge with the Beer Judge Certification Program** and was recently named **lead judge for the State Fair's Commercial Craft Beer Competition**.

The Elk Grove resident and avid homebrewer of beer and mead has been tasting and judging the brews of Californians for decades. He also teaches people seeking to become certified beer judges—Teckam has been involved in the local beer scene for years. Now he takes a new mantle. Brewers from all over California will be shipping their growlers, crowlers and kegs for his judging. SN&R chatted with Teckam about his new role and the beer community.

How'd you get into beer judging?

Through a homebrew club, they put on a preparatory course and I took the exam with it. So I've been involved for 22 years.

Has judging beer changed much, since you started?

Eh, the program has some minor changes, but no, it's just there's more people all the time, but there's always people that drop out. The faces change. Some people really stick with it.

Do you have a really good palate? Are you good at picking up flavors?

Sure, it's at least average. ... It's a matter of experience with the program and how long you've been with it, too. And you always get better by practice. You don't have to be a super taster to do this.

What does judging a beer look like?

I write up evaluations of the beer, describing, giving helpful suggestions for improvements, noting flaws as well as adherence to styles they're entering in the competition.

Are you still homebrewing?

I make meads for the most part. I haven't made beer in about a year and a half. ... I'm awfully busy.

How many beers have you tried in your tenure?

I couldn't even estimate. It'd have to be thousands.

Do you get tired of it ever?

Oh, no, no. It's still fun.

Yeah, I was going to say—is it fun going out and judging?

Oh yeah. Good competitions take care of you. Nice lunches, there's always nice people that are knowledgeable to hang around with.

Do you have a favorite beer to judge?

No. I'm open to about anything.

You're also training other judges, right?

I teach classes and I give exams.

Gotcha. What's that like?

I give 10 preparatory classes. They're gonna deal with a different subject related to beer such as their ingredients, and help people prepare for an online entrance exam, and then they sit for a tasting exam that involves six beers that they need to score as if in a competition. And they get graded by somebody that does not know them. It's all anonymous.

Are more people becoming judges these days?

I don't see any real spike or anything. There's always people that drop out of the program, or you just never see them again, and there's always new people interested. I guess I could say it's pretty steady but I'm sure it increases slightly from year to year.

Is judging big competitions stressful?

Oh, no, I don't think so at all—even if I am running it.