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PRO TIPS: HOW TO MASTER THE BEER FESTIVAL

DO YOUR HOMEWORK.

Beer festivals are a great introduction to new breweries. So before you go, check the festival Web site — most events list the participating breweries, and some (such as Snallygaster and the Annapolis Craft Beer and Music Festival) provide the names of all the beers those breweries will be pouring — and plan your approach. Focus on beers that are not available at your favorite happy hour.

Washington-based beer lovers going to Annapolis on Saturday, for example, should look for beers from RAR Brewing (Cambridge, Md.) and Burley Oak (Berlin, Md.), which are hard to find on this side of the Chesapeake Bay. Lagunitas fans might want to skip its table, since the Petaluma brewery is bringing its IPA and Pils, which are common in local bars, and explore other beers instead — perhaps Victory's Prima Pils or Finch's Hardcore Chimera Imperial IPA?

With 275 choices over seven pages, Snallygaster's beer list is overwhelming. But take time to study it beforehand instead of just scanning it when you arrive at Yards Park on Saturday. You don't want to realize at 4 p.m. that your favorite rare Oktoberfest, Avery's The Kaiser, has already kicked, and you didn't even know it was available because it was buried down at No. 258.

STRETCH YOUR LEGS.

If a festival doesn't offer a complete list of beers in advance, the best approach is to get a bit of exercise. Grab a beer from the first spot you see without a line and make a circuit of the tables. (This is time-consuming at more spread-out festivals, such as the Mid-Atlantic Oktoberfest or the Northern Virginia Brewfest, but there's no reason you can't grab another sample along the way.) Make note of where your favorites are located and what they've brought.

Geography matters: Tables near festival entrances are frequently crowded, as people try to score beer as soon as they arrive. Head for the fringes or the middle and beat the rush.

DON'T DRINK THINGS YOU'VE HAD BEFORE. IF YOU DO, SAVE THEM FOR LAST.

You could run an entire festival by harnessing the power of beer geek eye-rolls as they walk past a Shock Top or Guinness stand. (Yes, you'll be able to find those at some events.) The purpose of a beer festival is not to get as drunk as possible — it's to try new seasonal beers, or find out why your friends came back from the beach raving about Burley Oak.

One exception I make: It's fine to order an old favorite if you're comparing two similar beers. If you know you love Sweetwater's IPA, for instance, it's nice to have that as a control before tasting Ballast Point's Sculpin IPA.

PLANNING IS GOOD, BUT BE FLEXIBLE.

While Beer Advocate and RateBeer are helpful Web sites, they're not the be-all, end-all arbiters of what's good. "People make the mistake of waiting in very long lines for massively hyped beers," says Tim Prendergast, who works for craft beer distributor Kysela Pere et Fils and has manned taps at several festivals this year. "They show up with their lists [printed from Beer Advocate] and they're only in line for the Hill Farmsteads of the world. But there are beers that are probably just as good that don't have lines. People have preconceived notions about breweries before they've even tried a beer."

"Part of the fun at a festival is finding new things," says ChurchKey supremo Greg Engert, who picked the beers for Snallygaster. "Leave yourself open to new things: If you walk by a table and it's not busy, and something looks good, go try it."

At a festival with unlimited sampling, Prendergast recommends trying as much as you can: "Just get a half-pour, try it and if you don't like it, move on," he says. "You're doing yourself a disservice if you don't take advantage of this."

CHOOSE QUALITY OVER QUANTITY.

"Sometimes people feel pressure to drink to get their money's worth," Engert says, which is why Snallygaster isn't an all-you-can-drink event, but requires people to pay for each beer. "This is a beer festival for everyone. It's not just a Rare and Obscure Festival — we don't want it to be all expensive \$9 rarities," he says, pointing to AleWerks' Shorty Time, a session IPA, as something everyone should try.

The No. 1 mistake people make, Prendergast says: "They drink too much. ... People overimbibe and they bring the festival atmosphere down for everyone." Just because the taps are open for four hours doesn't mean you have to spend every minute with a beer in your hand. Most festivals have soda and water available, too.

Engert is more succinct: "Make sure you eat, and plan on drinking as much water as you do beer."

Snallygaster, which was held at Union Market last year, will return to Yards Park near Nationals Park this weekend.



ILLUSTRATION BY PETER OUMANSKI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST