

BIG BREW

MAY 3, 2025

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Brewing Big for Big Brew

By Ethan Elliott

The words “Big Brew” conjure several possible scenarios. Setting Macbeth’s witches aside, one of them is the concept of making a high-alcohol, heavy hitter of a beer. Another is making a very large batch of beer, accepting that size is subjective and one brewer’s pilot batch is another’s annual output. On a global scale, Big Brew could also be the concept of a concerted effort by the brewing community to brew the same beer, in multiple places, simultaneously. The latter, of course, is where this story begins.

BIG GOAL

Big Brew is an annual event, organized by the American Homebrewers Association (AHA), that takes place every year on the first Saturday of May. May 3, 2025 will be the 27th annual Big Brew. It’s a celebration that anticipates our holiday—National Homebrew Day—which was first officially recognized by Congress on May 7, 1988.

The goal of Big Brew is simple: promote homebrewing by getting as many people as possible brewing the same thing on the

same day. This is often accomplished at the club level, but it’s a free country, and anyone can brew (by themselves, with friends and family, or with their dogs). The rules are simple: in order to officially participate in Big Brew, the brewing must take place on the appointed day, which gives a nice 24-hour window for early birds and night owls alike; and participants are encouraged to use the official recipe.





The annual Big Brew Competition is hosted by the Weiz Guys Homebrew Club, in Loveland, Colo. All AHA-registered clubs are invited to enter.

The AHA chooses different recipes every year. This year's selection is definitely a heavy hitter. At 11.2% ABV and boasting two National Homebrew Competition gold medals, Big Blimp! American Barleywine is sure to create a buzz for all who brew it. It was developed by Larry and Donna Reuter of Akron, Ohio, members of the Society of Akron Area Zymurgists (SAAZ) homebrew club. Big Blimp! won gold medals in the Strong American Ale category in 2019 and then again in 2023 after slight changes to the hop schedule. Requiring 22 pounds of grain for a five-gallon batch, a larger mash tun (or an extra one) may be necessary. If you'd prefer to brew an extract-based recipe instead, please visit HomebrewersAssociation.org/beer-recipes/.

BIG EVENT

Those who embrace Big Brew truly make it an event. Many clubs brew a large batch, then split the wort between members. Some commercial breweries even do a wort share, where homebrewers can bring their own fermentation vessel and take home wort. One such share takes place at Half Batch Brewing in Hendersonville, Tenn. Likewise, Jefferson Beer Supply in Jefferson, S.D. invites homebrewers to join head brewer Nicki Werner for the mash and then take home as much wort as they can carry. The Upstate New York Homebrewers Association is arranging a collaboration with a local brewery to provide the club with commercially made wort distributed in five-gallon increments, according to club president Sam Tischler.

Even without premade wort, many breweries and clubs across the country plan a massive brew day get-together. Jon Newton at 4 Barking Dogs Brewery in Burien, Wash. puts up four large tents and invites local homebrewers to join in making both extract and all-grain versions of the recipe; plus, there's smoked chicken and axe throwing. The Ozark Zymurgists plan to spend the day homebrewing, barbecuing, and enjoying



A Big Brew requires big kettles. Calculate grain space, as well as water. Take turns stirring—or not.

Print a copy of the recipe and use it to take copious notes. The more brew data you record, the more repeatable the beer. Save these printouts for future reference.

good company; later they'll enter their brews into the Weiz Guys Big Brew Competition.

Marc Makarem, head brewer at Back Channel Brewing in Spring Park, Minn., says they'll clear their dock space and provide water for homebrewers who bring their own gear and brew. After the wort share, they'll head into the taproom for burgers and watch the Kentucky Derby on the Jumbotron. Sign up through the Minnesota Home Brewers Association at mnbrewers.com.

One club even plans to take Big Brew camping. The Inland Empire Brewers Homebrew Club in Corona, Calif. has missed Big Brew repeatedly over the years because it coincides with the Southern California Homebrewers Festival, a 40-homebrew-club camping weekend in Temecula, Calif. This year, Inland Empire president Jason Dunn plans to take equipment and supplies to brew at their campsite while fellow brew clubs stop by for "trick-or-treating for beer." Dunn says, "hopefully I can find some Kveik yeast, because of the lack of fermentation temperature control."

If none of these locations are close enough, contact your local homebrew clubs, breweries, or supply shops to find out about similar events in your area.

No matter which avenue one takes to participate, the thing that sets Big Brew apart is the thing that makes it special:



every participant endeavors to brew the same recipe on the same day. That doesn't mean every beer will taste the same—in fact, tasting the beers after Big Brew is another huge part of the process. Even with the same recipe, differences in equipment, water, and fermentation temperatures have profound effects on the final result. Just ask Blake Ernst.

BIG COMPETITION

Ernst is vice president of the Weiz Guys Homebrew Club in Loveland, Colo., which hosts the annual Big Brew Competition. Because everyone uses the same recipe, says Ernst, "it is a club-versus-club contest—a competition of process. Participation in Big Brew had been lacking," he notes, but he believes many clubs put extra effort into brewing for competitions. So he proposed the idea to AHA executive director Julia Herz, who enthusiastically agreed. Originally established as a friendly bet between two Colorado clubs, the competition soon gained momentum, and in its first year, the Weiz Guys received entries from six states, found National- and Master-level

Photos courtesy of Ethan Elliott



judges to score the entries, and received sponsorship from Brewers Supply Group.

“The biggest purpose of the competition is to promote homebrewing and get people together,” says Ernst. In that spirit, the event is now open to all AHA-registered homebrew clubs across the country. Last year, the Weiz Guys emailed around 1,700 clubs, and they hope to reach even more this year. There is a 300-entry limit, and entry fee proceeds are split between the top three winning clubs’ charity of choice. For more information and entry details, visit weizguys.com/bigbrew.

For the last two years the competition has been held in July, but with this year’s recipe, it will be pushed later to accommodate the extra conditioning time entrants will need. The entry window for 2025 will be 9/1–10/20, with judging 11/8.

Even if you’re not interested in competing, you can still participate in Big Brew. Simply call up the gang, gather equipment, and host your own brew on May 3. Looking for pointers, or maybe just a laugh alongside some well-meaning misinformation? Keep reading for a step-by-step guide to creating a Big Brew of any size.

Before investing in an electric brew controller, make friends with an electrical engineer. Have an equipment team ready on brew day.

Carefully transfer cooled wort to the fermenter, aerate, and pitch yeast at the recommended temperature.

BIG PLANNING

When planning any brew, the early bird gets the wort, as the old saying goes. First, and most obvious: go over the official recipe and make sure you have what you need for brew day. If there aren’t any local breweries or clubs doing a wort share, purchase ingredients from your local homebrew shop. Locate and inspect your brewing equipment, and make sure you have the necessary supplies. This sometimes entails a perilous quest through the recesses of the attic or garage. It also sometimes means making repairs or changing out components. Prepare thyself.

In other pre-brew preparations, make a jobs chart and assign each member of your brew team specific tasks (these can be rotated from one brew day to the next). For example, one person can be the Head Brewer, in charge of following the recipe, brewing, and not missing a beat of the hop schedule. (This is also the person to blame if the beer doesn’t turn out.) The honorary title of Water Boy is given to the brewer’s assistant—the gofer who runs tasks as assigned. Someone has to be in charge of equipment, because something always breaks or needs to be adapted on brew day. The thankless, bottom-of-the-barrel jobs of the Cleaning Crew are actually instrumental to the execution of a successful brew day. Without cleaned and sanitized equipment, good beer can go very bad. Got extra people? Assign them fun jobs: King

for a Day, Comedian, Unapologetic Lush. If everyone starts the day with a clear set of tasks and expectations, the brew day runs much smoother.

BIG DAY

First thing on brew day, work together to set up the equipment and start heating water. While it’s heating, fill everyone’s glass and have a team meeting to make sure the crew understands their assignments for the day. Brew buddies who can work autonomously to complete tasks make the process easier and faster. And don’t let everyone walk away just yet. There’s still one vital job to do: record data.

Record (practically) everything! The key to making repeatable beer is to keep accurate notes on as many brew parameters as possible. What was the ambient temperature on brew day? What were the starting volumes? How long was the mash? Were there any recipe adjustments? What was the final boil volume? What was the pitching temperature? Each of these elements plays a part in the subtle shifts that impact beer flavor. Keeping track of variables allows for repeatability—it’s one of the best ways to ensure you’ll be making great beer. When making the exact same recipe more than once, a change in any variable can impact the final product. Take notes!

The outside temperature will have a huge impact on heat loss, so calculate this into your temperature targets. Once your strike water reaches the desired temperature, transfer it to the mash tun. When the right amount of water is in place, have one person stir while another slowly adds grains (oh, Water Boy!).

If all calculations were done well, this should result in a reasonable mash temperature. Big Blimp! has a single-infusion mash temperature of 150°F (66°C). Once all grains have been thoroughly stirred in, to quote my good friend Gandalf, “Keep it secret. Keep it safe.” Cover the mash tun with a lid and consider adding blankets or additional insulation to help the valuable contents maintain a steady temperature. The mash is a great time to refill drinks, eat lunch, or write a letter to someone you admire.

While everyone else starts eating lunch, the Water Boy should start heating sparge water. (It’s not a hard job, so why should anyone else have to eat cold food?) Enjoy a hot meal while they stand alone, TAKING NOTES, literally watching a pot boil. Alright, somebody go out there and keep them company.

When the water is ready, begin the sparge: pour water over the grain bed gently to avoid over-compression, then begin transferring wort from the mash tun to the boil kettle. Transfer slowly, maintaining about an inch of sparge water above the grain bed. Take it



slow. The only rush here comes from significant others who want their house back.

Once the wort from the mash has been transferred to the boil kettle, set hop schedule timers and take notes on volumes, temperatures, time, etc. The boil does require occasional stirring and attention—especially at the hot break stage—but it's typically a good time to gather, chat, and have a homebrew.

At the end of the boil, cool the wort and transfer it to the fermentation vessel. Carboys and plastic buckets work great, but conicals exude awesomeness. All yeasts have different temperature requirements, so consult the manufacturer's specifications for the strain you are using. Take notes. At this point, just about everyone's job is done.

All this time, of course, the Cleaning Crew has worked silently in the background, mixing up sanitizer, cleaning lines, fermenters, and sometimes bottles or kegs, without a word of thanks. Well, this is their thanks: don't forget to clean all of the kettles and turn off the lights.

LITTLE THINGS

Making a stronger brew shouldn't really affect timing, but somehow high-gravity beers always seem to result in longer brew days. It does take longer to heat the extra sparge water, and lautering can take more time. While a very efficient small batch can be finished in under six hours, for Big Brew tell people eight hours at least.

Kettle space is another important consideration when brewing a high-gravity batch. More grain takes up more room, sometimes

requiring a larger (or additional) mash vessel. A larger grain bill also absorbs more water. Have more on hand or consult brew software for calculations.

Temperature is another variable that deserves special attention. Yeast pitch tem-

Set up equipment and start heating water as early as possible. During cold or hot weather extremes, heat wrap the mash tun to maintain consistent temperatures. (Do not apply direct heat to wrapped kettles.)

perature can affect yeast health, and fermentation temperature has a significant impact on yeast activity—and therefore on flavor outcome. Follow recommendations or repeat past successes (from all those notes).

Big Brew is a great chance to participate in brewing on a grand scale, and to test or compare brewing processes. Whether participating in a large club event, camping in California, picking up your five gallons at a wort share, or firing up burners in your own backyard, spread the word and join the celebration on May 3.

Ethan Elliott is a Denver-based writer and homebrewer who would have made a great monk, except for the celibacy. As a hobbyist inventor, he lives by the motto "Where there's an Ethan, there's a way."



Big Blimp! Barleywine

Strong American Ale



Courtesy of Donna and Larry Reuter

Yield: 5 U.S. gal. (18.9 L)

Original gravity: 1.096 (22.9°P)

Final gravity: 1.018 (4.6°P)

Bitterness: 100 IBU

Color: 17 SRM

Alcohol: 11.2% by volume

MALTS & ADJUNCTS

19 lb. (8.62 kg) Simpsons Finest Maris Otter

1 lb. (454 g) Simpsons Crystal Light Malt

8 oz. (227 g) Simpsons Crystal Medium Malt

4 oz. (113 g) Dingemans Special B®

4 oz. (113 g) Rahr Dextrin Malt

1 lb. (454 g) dextrose, in boil

HOPS

0.75 oz. (21 g) Cascade, 5.8% a.a., FWH

0.75 oz. (21 g) Centennial, 12.8% a.a., FWH

0.75 oz. (21 g) Chinook, 10% a.a., FWH

1.25 oz. (35 g) Cascade, 5.8% a.a., whirlpool

1.25 oz. (35 g) Centennial, 12.8% a.a., whirlpool

1.25 oz. (35 g) Chinook, 10% a.a., whirlpool

1 oz. (28 g) Cascade, 5.8% a.a., dry hop 4 days

2 oz. (57 g) Centennial, 12.8% a.a., dry hop 4 days

1 oz. (28 g) Chinook, 10% a.a., dry hop 4 days

YEAST

2 packs (22 g) LalBrew BRY-97™

WATER

Ca 5 ppm, Mg 42 ppm, Na 60 ppm, Cl 80 ppm, SO₄ 20 ppm

ADDITIONAL ITEMS

1 tsp. Irish moss @ 10 min

DIRECTIONS

Mash at 150°F (66°C) for 90 min. Target mash pH of 5.3. Batch or fly sparge for 15 to 30 min. Boil 90 min. Begin chilling. Add whirlpool hops when wort reaches 190°F (88°C) and whirlpool 30 minutes while continuing to chill wort to 60–62°F (16–17°F), then aerate and pitch yeast. Dry pitching without rehydration is recommended (more straightforward process, more consistent fermentation performance, and reduced risk of contamination). Ferment 21 days in primary at 60–62°F (16–17°C), then dry hop for 4 days. Keg with 3.5 oz. (99 g) of corn sugar in a simple syrup (mixture of water and sugar, typically 1:1) and allow carbonation to develop over 2 weeks. Crash cool to 30°F (–1°C) and hold 2 weeks, then age until ready to serve.



CLUBS CORNER IDEAS

Calling all AHA-Sanctioned Homebrew Clubs! Want to see your club featured in Zymurgy's Clubs Corner? Contact us at zymurgy@brewersassociation.org.