

CMI's NHC Project

We started with the premise that our club has some very good brewers. Several members of the Cincinnati Malt Infusers (CMI) have won Best of Show awards in local and regional competitions. Since its inception in 1994, we have between 45 and 60 members annually. However, only one CMI member has won at the AHA's National Homebrew Competition (NHC). We planned to change that.

Several CMI members met in the spring of 2015 and decided on a new club project. Our goals were simple:

1. Primary: Have a CMI Member win a gold medal at the NHC;
2. Secondary: Learn a specific style of beer and develop an understanding of what is award winning for the style; and
3. Tertiary: Become better brewers and develop a community among CMI brewers that fosters growth, learning and a little beer fellowship.

Requirements for participation were simple: you must be an AHA member; you must register your entries; and you must deliver your entries by the deadline. We started by soliciting the advice of past Ninkasi Award winners Jamil Zainasheff and Gordon Strong. Each had a few pints of wisdom to share.

Jamil suggested flooding a style category with multiple exceptional entries. He wrote, "If you can get 10 people brewing at a high level, then sending in 10 great examples in one category should possibly net you a medal." Gordon advised, "I would be absolutely certain you all are sending your best beers not just all the beers you think might place. Things have changed a little [in the NHC] . . . most notably the quota system." We took this as a directive to include only our best beers in addition to the club project style.

CMI Leadership took this advice to heart in planning our run at the NHC medal stand. Will Magnuszewski and Rick Franckhauser (CMI's 2 BJCP National ranked judges) reviewed prior NHC competitions and selected category 7B, an Altbier as our style for the 2016 NHC. At the time, few CMI members were familiar with the style. Even less had tasted it.

As a backup, Will suggested we brew a second style deemed "low-hanging fruit". Based on the relatively small number of entries, our Fearless Leaders settled upon category 1A Light Lager. For many of us, this category represented the reason we became homebrewers, just to avoid this style. For others, it was a challenge.

With the beer styles in mind, CMI recruited members in the summer of 2015 to brew the first attempt at a medal winner. In October of 2015, CMI invited Master Judge Ron Smith from the Foam Blowers of Indiana club (FBI) to give a presentation on Altbiers. CMI shipped in several bottles of Zum Uerige, one of the BJCP commercial examples for Altbier. We also tasted the first attempts of the members' homebrew, all while eating brats and metts. Ron discussed

the history and the flavor profile of Altbier. Quite frankly, some of the fresher homebrewed examples were superior to the aged Ueriges from Dusseldorf. This drove home the point that Altbiers are better when they are fresher.

The CMI members also entered the Altbiers and Light Lagers in our Cincinnati Oktobersbest Homebrew Competition that same month. We had enough examples of category 7B that several of the judges became suspicious of our plan to storm the class. After the competition, the members gathered to review the judges' comments and discussed changes to our recipes to brew again for the NHC in 2016.

We re-brewed our Altbiers and Light Lagers and drove them together with our best beers in March of 2016 to Indianapolis for the Regional Competition. To enhance our chances of winning, we employed Dr. High Priest Abayomi Aaliyah to cast a voodoo spell over our beers to make them irresistible. We baited the judges with a couple of six packs of Cincinnati's finer local micro-breweries. And then, we waited.

By April, we were drunk with success. CMI nearly swept the Amber Hybrid Beer category in Indianapolis with Tim & Mary Pat McKee taking first and Will Magnuszewski and Kathryn Kien taking second. In addition, Tim & Mary Pat McKee and Eric Carman punched through the first round with a second in Strong Ale and a first in German Wheat, respectively. Surely, we had decoded the winning strategy to claim a medal at the NHC.

Alas, it was not to be. When the results of the 2016 NHC in Baltimore were posted, CMI was sadly missing. But, the project was not a total failure. We learned about Altbier. Tim & Mary Pat McKee went on to brew their recipe at a local micro-brewery. We had a couple of beers make it to the mini BOS in Baltimore. We know a little about fresh versus aged Altbier. We had fun as a group trying to brew better beer, and many of us brew an Altbier as a regular beer in our annual brewing rotation.

But, there was unfinished business.

CMI Leadership met again in the summer of 2016 to discuss another charge to the medal stand for 2017. This time the Leadership chose a category 27 Historical Roggenbier, based in large part upon Eric Carman's strong showing in an underrepresented category. Once again, the NHC Project members set to brewing an award winning Roggenbier.

The CMI members met at our 2016 October meeting to discuss all things rye. We had cookies, bread, beer and whiskey made with rye to compare the flavor with similar foods made with barley and wheat. We concluded that the flavor of rye versus wheat is very subtle, if almost unperceivable. Only a side by side tasting of rye and wheat grains highlighted their differences. For a second year, CMI members bombarded the category 27 Historical Beer in the Cincinnati Oktobersbest Homebrew Competition with nearly a dozen Roggenbiers. The judges for the Roggenbiers were particularly critical of what surely must be a club prank.

For a second time, the NHC Project brewers met after the Oktobersbest Competition to discuss updates and changes to their recipes for the 2017 NHC. After re-tooling and re-brewing our recipes, sometimes 3 and 4 times, we drove our Roggenbiers and our other best beers to Indianapolis. For a second time, CMI almost swept the class for German Wheat beers with Eric Carman and Rick Franckhauser going 2nd and 3rd. Will Magnusewski and Kathryn Kien also grabbed a 2nd for their Light Lager. Our celebration was much more reserved than the “dog pile” of 2016. Further tempering our excitement was the thought of getting rid of all that Roggenbier in our basements.

But, this year would be different. Eric Carman crashed the medal stand with a second in German Wheat beers in Minnesota. Success tasted good. We accomplished nearly all of our goals. The gold medal is our next prize.

We learned about some unfamiliar beers, we practiced brewing and re-brewing our recipes, and we celebrated some victories. CMI is still pursuing gold and maybe, just maybe, a Gambrinus Award for a small club from the Queen City on the River.

Special thanks to all the NHC Project Brewers: Gavi Begtrup, Eric Carman, Ben Echtenkamp, Lucian Florea, Rick Franckhauser, Jason Hammond, Dave Mangels, Will Magnuszewski & Kathryn Kien, Tim McDonald, Tim & Mary Pat McKee, Eric Penrod, Chris Siegman, and Chris Wagner. Also, thanks to Dave Dixon for carrying the CMI standard.

By Michael Florez

CMI Member and NHC Hopeful