

# BCJP 2021 Guidelines Beer

## 11. BRITISH BITTER

*The family of British bitters grew out of English pale ales as a draught product after the late 1800s. The use of crystal malts in bitters became more widespread after WWI. Traditionally served very fresh under no pressure (gravity or hand pump only) at cellar temperatures (i.e., “real ale”). Most bottled or kegged versions of UK-produced bitters are often higher-alcohol and more highly carbonated versions of cask products produced for export, and have a different character and balance than their draught counterparts in Britain (often being sweeter and less hoppy than the cask versions). These guidelines reflect the “real ale” version of the style, not the export formulations of commercial products. Several regional variations of bitter exist, ranging from darker, sweeter versions served with nearly no head to brighter, hoppier, paler versions with large foam stands, and everything in between. Judges should not over-emphasize the caramel component of these styles. Exported bitters can be oxidized, which increases caramellike flavors (as well as more negative flavors). Do not assume that oxidation-derived flavors are traditional or required for the style.*

### 11A. Ordinary Bitter

**Overall Impression:** Low gravity, alcohol, and carbonation make this an easy-drinking session beer. The malt profile can vary in flavor and intensity, but should never override the overall bitter impression. Drinkability is a critical component of the style.

**Aroma:** Low to moderate malt aroma, often (but not always) with a light caramel quality. Bready, biscuity, or lightly toasty malt complexity is common. Mild to moderate fruitiness. Hop aroma can range from moderate to none, typically with a floral, earthy, resinous, or fruity character. Generally no diacetyl, although very low levels are allowed.

**Appearance:** Pale amber to light copper color. Good to brilliant clarity. Low to moderate white to off-white head. May have very little head due to low carbonation.

**Flavor:** Medium to moderately high bitterness. Moderately low to moderately high fruity esters. Moderate to low hop flavor, typically with an earthy, resinous, fruity, or floral character. Low to medium maltiness with a dry finish. The malt profile is typically bready, biscuity, or lightly toasty. Low to moderate caramel or toffee flavors are optional. Balance is often decidedly bitter, although the bitterness should not completely overpower the malt flavor, esters, and hop flavor. Generally no diacetyl, although very low levels are allowed.

**Mouthfeel:** Light to medium-light body. Low carbonation, although bottled examples can have moderate carbonation.

**Comments:** The lowest gravity member of the British Bitter family, typically known to consumers simply as “bitter” (although brewers tend to refer to it as Ordinary Bitter to distinguish it from other members of the family).

**History:** See comments in category introduction.

**Characteristic Ingredients:** Pale ale, amber, or crystal malts. May use a touch of dark malt for color adjustment. May use sugar adjuncts, corn, or wheat. English finishing hops are most traditional, but any hops are fair game; if American hops are used, a light touch is required. Characterful British yeast.

**Style Comparison:** Some modern variants are brewed exclusively with pale malt and are known as golden ales, summer ales, or golden bitters. Emphasis is on the bittering hop addition as opposed to the aggressive middle and late hopping seen in American ales.

**Vital Statistics:** OG: 1.030 – 1.039 IBUs: 25 – 35 FG: 1.007 – 1.011 SRM: 8 – 14 ABV: 3.2 – 3.8%

**Commercial Examples:** Bateman’s XB, Brains Bitter, Brakspear Gravity, Fuller’s Chiswick Bitter, Greene King IPA, Tetley’s Original Bitter

**Tags:** session-strength, amber-color, top-fermented, britishisles, traditional-style, amber-ale-family, bitter

### 11B. Best Bitter

**Overall Impression:** A flavorful, yet refreshing, session beer. Some examples can be more malt balanced, but this should not override the overall bitter impression. Drinkability is a critical component of the style.

**Aroma:** Low to moderate malt aroma, often (but not always) with a low to medium-low caramel quality. Bready, biscuity, or lightly toasty malt complexity is common. Mild to moderate fruitiness. Hop aroma can range from moderate to none, typically with a floral, earthy, resinous, or fruity character. Generally no diacetyl, although very low levels are allowed.

**Appearance:** Pale amber to medium copper color. Good to brilliant clarity. Low to moderate white to off-white head. May have very little head due to low carbonation.

**Flavor:** Medium to moderately high bitterness. Moderately low to moderately high fruity esters. Moderate to low hop flavor, typically with an earthy, resinous, fruity, or floral character. Low to medium maltiness with a dry finish. The malt profile is typically bready, biscuity, or lightly toasty. Low to moderate caramel or toffee flavors are optional. Balance is often decidedly bitter, although the bitterness should not completely overpower the malt flavor, esters and hop flavor. Generally no diacetyl, although very low levels are allowed.

**Mouthfeel:** Medium-light to medium body. Low carbonation, although bottled examples can have moderate carbonation.

**Comments:** More evident malt flavor than in an ordinary bitter; this is a stronger, session-strength ale.

**History:** See comments in category introduction.

**Characteristic Ingredients:** Pale ale, amber, or crystal malts. Most contain sugar. May use a touch of caramel or dark malt for color adjustment. May use corn or wheat. English finishing hops are most traditional, but any hops are fair game; if American hops are used, a light touch is required. Characterful British yeast.

**Style Comparison:** More alcohol than an ordinary bitter, and often using higher-quality ingredients. Less alcohol than a strong bitter. More caramel or base malt character and color than a British Golden Ale. Emphasis is on the bittering hop addition as opposed to the aggressive middle and late hopping seen in American ales.

**Vital Statistics:** OG: 1.040 – 1.048 IBUs: 25 – 40 FG: 1.008 – 1.012 SRM: 8 – 16 ABV: 3.8 – 4.6%

**Commercial Examples:** Adnams Southwold Bitter, Fuller's London Pride, Harvey's Sussex Best Bitter, Salopian Darwin's Origin, Surrey Hills Shere Drop, Timothy Taylor Landlord

**Tags:** standard-strength, amber-color, top-fermented, britishisles, traditional-style, amber-ale-family, bitter

## 11C. Strong Bitter

**Overall Impression:** An average-strength to moderately strong British bitter ale. The balance may vary between fairly even between malt and hops to somewhat bitter. Drinkability is a critical component of the style. A rather broad style that allows for considerable interpretation by the brewer.

**Aroma:** Hop aroma moderately-high to moderately-low, typically with a floral, earthy, resinous, or fruity character. Medium to medium-high malt aroma, optionally with a low to moderate caramel component. Medium-low to medium-high fruity esters. Generally no diacetyl, although very low levels are allowed.

**Appearance:** Light amber to deep copper color. Good to brilliant clarity. Low to moderate white to off-white head. A low head is acceptable when carbonation is also low.

**Flavor:** Medium to medium-high bitterness with supporting malt flavors evident. The malt profile is typically bready, biscuity, nutty, or lightly toasty, and optionally has a moderately low to moderate caramel or toffee flavor. Hop flavor moderate to moderately high, typically with a floral, earthy, resinous, or fruity character. Hop bitterness and flavor should be noticeable, but should not totally dominate malt flavors. Moderately-low to high fruity esters. Optionally may have low amounts of alcohol. Medium-dry to dry finish. Generally no diacetyl, although very low levels are allowed.

**Mouthfeel:** Medium-light to medium-full body. Low to moderate carbonation, although bottled versions will be higher. Stronger versions may have a slight alcohol warmth but this character should not be too high.

**Comments:** In England today, "ESB" is a Fullers trademark, and no one thinks of it as a generic class of beer. It is a unique (but very well-known) beer that has a very strong, complex malt profile not found in other examples, often leading judges to overly penalize traditional English strong bitters. In America, ESB has been co-opted to describe a malty, bitter, reddish, standard-strength (for the US) British-type ale, and is a popular craft beer style. This may cause some judges to think of US brewpub ESBs as representative of this style.

**History:** See comments in category introduction. Strong bitters can be seen as a higher-gravity version of best bitters (although not necessarily "more premium" since best bitters are traditionally the brewer's finest product). British pale ales are generally considered a premium, export-strength pale, bitter beer that roughly approximates a strong bitter, although reformulated for bottling (including increasing carbonation levels). While modern British pale ale is considered a bottled bitter, historically the styles were different.

**Characteristic Ingredients:** Pale ale, amber, or crystal malts, may use a touch of black malt for color adjustment. May use sugar adjuncts, corn or wheat. English finishing hops are most traditional, but any hops are fair game; if American hops are used, a light touch is required. Characterful British yeast. Burton versions use medium to high sulfate water, which can increase the perception of dryness and add a mineral or sulfury aroma and flavor.

**Style Comparison:** More evident malt and hop flavors than in a special or best bitter, as well as more alcohol. Stronger versions may overlap somewhat with British Strong Ales, although Strong Bitters will tend to be paler and more bitter. More malt flavor (particularly caramel) and esters than an American Pale Ale, with different finishing hop character.

**Vital Statistics:** OG: 1.048 – 1.060 IBUs: 30 – 50 FG: 1.010 – 1.016 SRM: 8 – 18 ABV: 4.6 – 6.2%

**Commercial Examples:** Bass Ale, Bateman's Triple XB, Robinsons Trooper, Samuel Smith's Organic Pale Ale, Shepherd Neame Bishop's Finger, Summit Extra Pale Ale

**Tags:** standard-strength, amber-color, top-fermented, britishisles, traditional-style, amber-ale-family, bitter