

# The Coast

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June 04, 2009

## Beginner brewers battle for best bitter

### Homebrewers gather to celebrate the first ever winner of the Ultimate Brew-off, sponsored by the Noble Grape and Garrison Brewery.

by Craig Pinhey

There were cheers and hugs all around when Halifax brew fanatic Brian Harvey won the city's first-ever Ultimate Brew-Off, sponsored by Garrison Brewery and the Noble Grape last Thursday night. Harvey accepted the award for a beer he co-brewed with friends Justin Lockhart and Steve Trickett.

"We never really expected to win the competition. We just wanted to get some feedback on our brews, as it's rare around these parts to be judged by certified judges," Harvey told me after the event.

Over 80 beer enthusiasts were on hand for the Brew-Off's sampling and ceremony at Garrison. The carrot for competitors in the Ultimate Brew-Off was not just bragging rights amongst their peers (an important enough reason), but a chance to brew beer in a real brewery. Garrison promised to brew the winning beer and release it as a seasonal specialty product later this year.

Back in March, Garrison's head brewer Daniel Girard put out a challenge to local homebrewers to formulate a beer according to specific requirements. The desired style was ordinary bitter, what most British beer lovers (and Corrie fans) know of as "a pint of bitter."

Despite the name, this low alcohol ale (typically, 3.7-3.8 percent) is only moderately bitter and far from ordinary, with loads of flavour and body. Ordinary bitter is uncommon in Canada; a close comparison would be Granite's Best Bitter, but even that is too boozy and too bitter compared to this. It's a challenging style for home brewers, because there's less sweet malt, alcohol and hop bitterness to cover up any brewing defects.

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Brew-Off winner Brian Harvey and Garrison head brewer Daniel Girard.

Earlier that day, judges Patrice Godin, a homebrewer with commercial aspirations, Steve Haynes from the Noble Grape and I---all hallowed alumni of the Beer Judge Certification Program---settled down to choose the best ordinary bitter, whittled down by Girard to a final four from the 31 entries submitted by regional homebrewers.

The judges agreed Harvey's winning entry was right to style, brewed with British Maris Otter malt (a classic English ale yeast strain) and East Kent goldings hops, also from Britain. Harvey's brew was light amber, moderately bitter, low in alcohol (3.8 percent) and had a pleasing malt and hop balance.

Local brewers Rob and Eric Gray nabbed second. Their entry looked light like Boddington's and was remarkable because they made it mainly from malt extract, rather than an "all-grain" brew: no mean feat. Robert McGrath, from Brewnosers beer club, took third, fashioning his ordinary bitter from Maris Otter malt, East Kent goldings hops and a British ale yeast culture.

"It's going to be amazing to have a beer that we brewed made available to the public," Harvey said, "I can't imagine we'll tire of seeing someone drinking a pint of beer that we produced."


As for the name of the new beer, Garrison owner Brian Titus balked at "Brian's Bitter," since it would look rather suspicious given his own first name. Titus prefers "Harvey's Bitter" or even "Bitter Harvey." In any case, it will take a while before Harvey's brew hits the shelves or the tap. Garrison just released a new super-hoppy Hopyard Pale Ale and is hard pressed to brew enough of their regular brands to meet the summer demand.

Girard said he plans hard labour, like "shoveling out the spent grain from the mash tun," for Harvey when they do eventually brew together. What's that like? Imagine working in a large bowl of steaming hot porridge. Congratulations, Brian, you made it to the pros.


Craig Pinhey is a certified beer judge, sommelier and freelance writer. Visit him at [frogspad.ca](http://frogspad.ca).

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