



The best of Kits

Over the last several years, the number of beer kits available on the homebrew store shelf has increased hugely.

Although these kits provide a simple "user-friendly" introduction to brewing, it sometimes seems that beer kits suppress creative urges. Among many new brewers I have met, there seems to be an unspoken fear that if the magical beer-kit recipe is somehow tampered with, the beer gods will lash out angrily. As always, it is better to not worry.

When brewing from a kit, keep in mind that kits are just hopped malt extract - nothing more, nothing less. Anything that can be done with hopped malt extract can be done with a kit. If an apparition appears in the middle of the night before a brew and says "Don't make Pilsener, make Stout," it's perfectly all right to take that Pilsener kit, add a pound of roasted barley and some bittering hops, and brew away. Remember, this is your beer and you're the boss. The kit manufacturer is just your assistant.

Most kits come with horrendous instructions, so a few modifications should just about always be made to that beastly recipe on the label. First, if the kit calls for sugar, substitute malt extract. There is no single, magical rate of substitution.

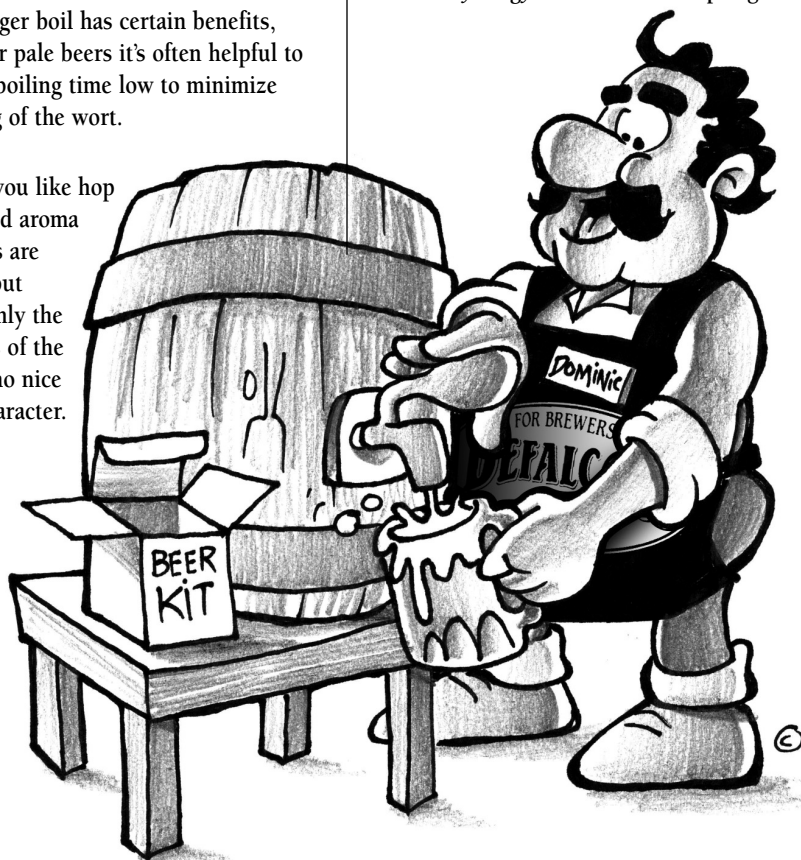
Where the label calls for about two pounds of sugar, I normally substitute a can of light plain malt extract, but you can use substantially more or less, or something else entirely and still get great results. Many brewers substitute light dry malt extract pound-for-pound in place of sugar. Experiment!

Second, boil the wort for at least 10 minutes regardless of what the instructions say. A longer boil has certain benefits, though for pale beers it's often helpful to keep the boiling time low to minimize darkening of the wort.

Third, if you like hop aroma, add aroma hops. Kits are hopped, but contain only the bitterness of the hop and no nice herbal character.

What to do with the instructions that come with the kit? I like to ritually burn them while wearing lederhosen and chanting the Reinheitsgebot. Just be sure to hang garlic around the door to prevent the hideous things from coming back from the dead to haunt you, à la "Night of the Living Lousy Beer Instructions."

by Kurt Denke
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