



Flavor Maps: Bringing Flavor Language to Life

By Lindsay Barr, M.S., Sensory Specialist, New Belgium Brewing Company and Co-Founder, DraughtLab Sensory Software

Think back on your most recent meal. You're likely able to identify what you ate and your level of satisfaction ("I had a protein shake and it was 'meh'"), but it's unlikely you instinctively described this meal in terms of its flavor characteristics ("I had a greyish blue beverage with the aroma of bloomed chocolate, vanilla, isoamyl acetate, and stale toast..."). We grow up defining our experience with flavor strictly in the sphere of subjectivity ("yum"/"yuck" or "like"/"dislike"), but if our senses are to be utilized as the measure of a product's flavor characteristics, we must describe our experience using objective terminology. This was the impetus for creating the Beer and Base Malt Flavor Maps. These tools display a unified, approachable, and comprehensive language aimed at guiding the user to better define their sense experience.

The Map Structure

Although used in a number of food and beverage industries, the wheel/circular format was avoided for three reasons. First and most importantly, such a format erroneously gives the impression of continuity among flavor notes that are adjacent to one another. Second, there is no directive for usage to match use, i.e., the format does not align with the sensory experience. Finally, it is not conducive to the modification that inevitably is required as sensory knowledge evolves.

Using the map format, the sensory terms were broken down into three tiers (similar to the wheel) organized based on the actual experience and flow of perception that occurs during the consumption of beer or other beverages. The objectives of each tier are as follows: Tier 1 represents the primary sensory modalities of taste, aroma, and mouthfeel. The second tier includes broad groupings of flavor descriptors, and the third tier allows for an in-depth look at the specific sensory descriptors that fall within each of the second tiers.

Utilizing this structured categorization of flavor terms will enable users to develop new products, ensure the quality of existing products, and market to target customers.

Product Development

Gaps in the existing flavor space can be revealed when competitive products are described and compared to one another. If these descriptions are paired with consumer preference, one could identify key attributes that drive consumer preference.

Quality Assurance

Like any QA parameter, each brand must have a flavor target and range of acceptable variability as a means for measuring consistency. Targets can be generated using a panel's descriptions of control(s), and subsequent batches can be measured against these flavor targets.

Marketing

We're all in the business—either directly or indirectly—of selling a product to be consumed and enjoyed. Brewers are seeking to create beers consumers want to drink, so the most powerful sales technique a vendor can use when selling malt, hops, yeast, and spices to brewers are their flavor characteristics. Brewers, in turn, can use sensory descriptors to sell their IPA's with a “splash of tropical fruit, tangerine, and lemon peel.”

Updates to the Flavor Maps

Language is constantly developing and changing, turning once commonly accepted terms into bafflegab. New terms will be added and existing terms will be rearranged based on frequency of use captured through the digital version of the flavor maps in the DraughtLab: Describe Your Beer and DraughtLab Pro applications.

Get Started

Sensory is a powerful tool that can inform everyday decisions in any food and beverage company, and it all begins by simply describing our products. To get started, Flavor Maps are available in print form at asbcnet.org and in both print and digital form through DraughtLab.com.