

REVIEW: MIDWEST SUPPLIES ‘BEER. SIMPLY BEER.’ BREWING KIT



MIDWEST SUPPLIES

I FIRMLY BELIEVE THAT THE KITCHEN is an incredible source of knowledge, and that you can't truly understand something you love until you try making it yourself. If you love beer, these truisms yield a glorious thing.

Homebrewing is something of a national passion, but I've never delved into it, mostly because there's so much great beer produced by people who know what they're doing. When homebrewers I know offer a bottle, it often comes with a side of excuses explaining what they think went wrong and how the next batch will be better. Brewers' pride runs deep.

Still, I wanted to give homebrewing a shot, and the Midwest Supplies "Beer. Simply Beer." starter kit seemed perfect for a first-timer. The concept: Everything you need in one box so you can make five gallons of beer, complete with instructions to make it simple, for just 50 bucks.

What could go wrong?

WIRED

First, note that “everything” is something of a misnomer. \$50 does not get you one key piece of equipment—a kettle in which to boil the wort that will become your beer. I had a big pot, but you if you don’t, Midwest offers one for \$40. You don’t get bottles, either, so figure another \$30 for empties unless you collect and clean your own.

Once I’d thoroughly read through the instructions and watched a few YouTube videos, brewing day went rather smoothly. I experienced only a couple of problems, the worst of which was my five-gallon kettle wasn’t quite big enough. It boiled over onto my stovetop. I ended up brewing in two pots, side by side, which worked out fine.

Making beer is far less complex than making wine (which I documented for WIRED in 2008), where technology can be a great friend. To ferment beer you simply put it in a big plastic bucket with yeast, and, two weeks later, bottle the finished product. This is the messiest part of the operation, involving siphons and hoses and lots of spilling. After investing about two and a half hours on brewing day and another two and a half on bottling day, I ended up with 45 bottles of pale ale. Ignore the cost of the pot (and the shipping), and that comes to about \$1.78 bottle. Future batches would of course be much more cost effective.

I was wholly expecting to screw it all up, but a month after brewing day, I cracked open a bottle and found it surprisingly drinkable. The beer possessed a nice, foamy head (though this vanishes too quickly), and a flavor, drawn from Cascade hops, familiar to any fan of, say, Sierra Nevada Pale Ale. It offered a pleasing balance of malt and hops in the body, and a finish I found quite bitter without being overwhelming. It’s hardly an earth-shattering ale, but it’s much better than Bud. I guess I’m a brewer now.

TIRED

My primary issue is the incredibly sloppy instructions. In fact, the kit includes two sets of instructions, and they don’t always agree. How “optional” is secondary fermentation? (Given that you don’t get a secondary fermentation, pretty optional.) How does the included hydrometer work, and why do you need? What about the bottle filler? And how does the included packet of oxygen wash sanitizer work? Given how critical cleanliness is to beer-making, failing to include specific instructions for using sanitizer is a crazy oversight.

Still, I seem to have stumbled through well enough (and Midwest's on-call brewmaster is there if you have questions), but a revamp of the brewing instructions as a pictorial guide with much finer detail would go a long way toward ensuring you don't screw up—and make that month of waiting all the less stressful.

All told I'm quite happy with the knowledge gained from the process and moderately impressed with the beer—even though now all I really want is a Racer 5.

RATING

7/10 - Very good, though not quite great.