



Drinkability in practice

The next beer | Few terms in the brewing and beverage industry are used as frequently – and yet so rarely understood – as “drinkability.” Behind this seemingly simple concept lies a complex, multidimensional phenomenon that goes far beyond taste impressions. Practical examples are provided below to explain in more detail how a drinkability check can be successfully applied and implemented in brewery practice – and has been for some time now.

Drinkability does not describe the first sip, but rather the impulse to take the second, third and fourth sips. It is therefore not a single sensory value, but rather the temporal profile of a drinking experience, characterized by balance, fatigue, resistance and reward. And it is precisely this dynamic that completely eludes traditional analytical methods.

While laboratory data ensure stability, purity and technical flawlessness, they do not explain why two beers with identical values for the same parameters can impart completely different sensory impressions. Drinkability arises first when aroma, texture, physiological stimuli and aftertaste interact – and it determines whether a product possesses the potential for the drinker to purchase the beer once more.

Not measurable but manageable

This makes drinkability a highly relevant economic metric that, paradoxically, cannot be measured but nonetheless can be influenced. The inherent challenges can be found on several levels:

- Sensory saturation: Dominant individual notes cause fatigue more rapidly than balanced sensory profiles.
- Oleaginous vs. body: A full body carries the drink forward, while heaviness slows it down.
- Mouthfeel: CO₂ and pH act as pacesetters for freshness or fatigue.
- Matrix effects of individual components: Bitterness, residual sweetness, proteins and polyphenols do not interact in a linear fashion.

Drinkability thus becomes the art of reduction. Moving away from spectacular individual flavors toward a clear, reproducible overall profile that minimizes sensory resistance. In an increasingly polarized market – with broad, high-volume product lines on one side and specialized niche providers on the other – the ability to deliberately shape drinkability becomes a key differentiator.

Today's consumers expect products that not only taste good but also seamlessly fit into their daily lives, special occasions and lifestyles. Younger target groups, in particular, are increasingly choosing to decouple enjoyment from beverages containing alcohol. Instead, they are placing greater emphasis on aspects such as lightness, freshness and social compatibility.

A holistic sensory approach in practice

But how can drinkability be systematically evaluated if it cannot be measured or perceived in a single sip? The answer lies in a holistic sensory approach that captures the interaction of all factors influencing the overall sensory impression – from the aroma to the aftertaste. The Doemens Drinkability Check closes precisely this gap by offering a reproducible evaluation model that links technical processes to the actual consumer experience.

This classification forms the theoretical framework. The following practical section will explain how breweries are able to improve the drinkability of their products in a targeted manner by clearly adjusting technological parameters, introducing a systematic sensory analysis program and applying a reproducible approach. This approach starts with the recipe and extends through the process all the way to a beer's relevance in the market.

The 100-point scale

The Drinkability Check consists of two different tasting approaches. The first approach comprises a tasting which assesses intensity and is presented in the form of a spider web diagram. The second approach utilizes a 100-point rating scale developed by Doemens. The beer is evaluated based on the parameters "Appearance", "Aroma", "Overall impression on the palate" and "Drinkability" and these are used to calculate the total score.

The 100-point scale is advantageous because "thinking in percentages" is logical and familiar to most users. 100 percent means 100 percent; there is no higher rating – the beer is one of a kind: "A world-class beer, probably the absolute best this beer style has to offer."

The other categories are "superb" for 95–99 points, "very good" for 90–94 points, "good" for 85–89 points, "satisfactory" for 80–84 points, ... and so on, down to "unsatisfactory" for scores less than 60 points. The higher the score, the better the beer is rated.

In addition, the intensity of the beer is evaluated in a taste test, and the results are depicted in spider web diagrams.

Descriptors that enhance or reduce drinkability

Drinkability is analyzed using spider web diagrams (fig. 1) using predefined descriptors.

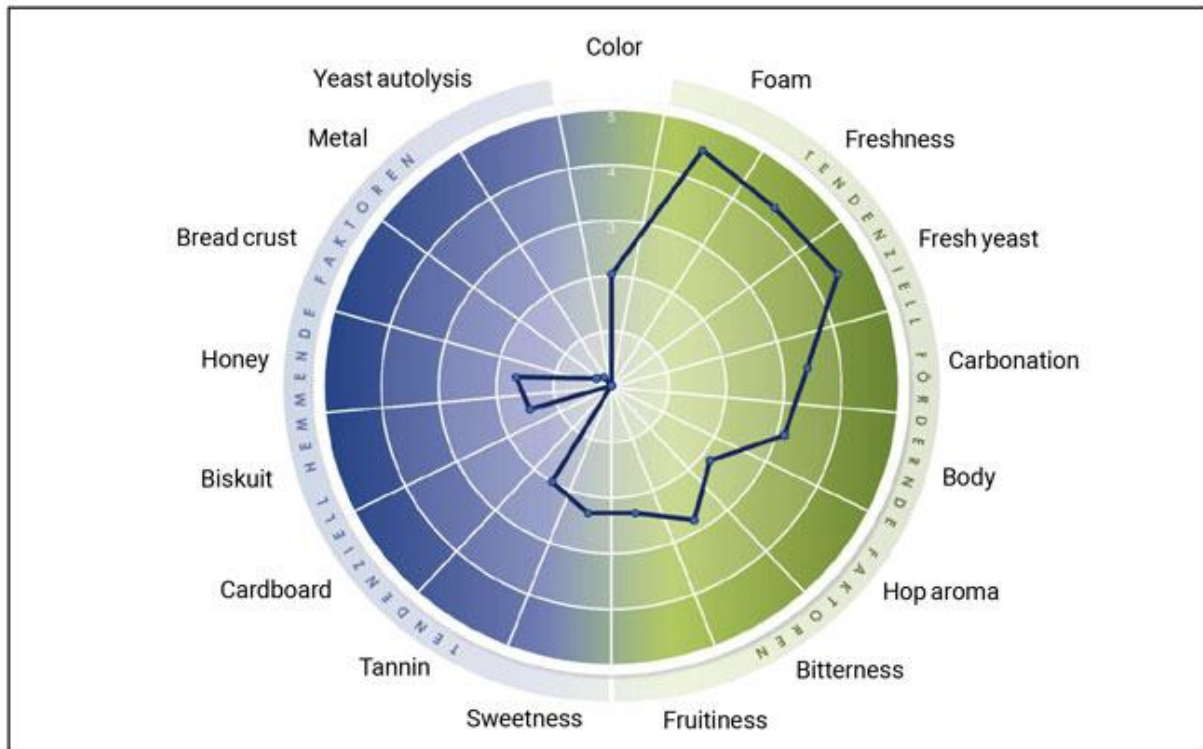


Fig. 1 An example of a spider web diagram generated using descriptors of attributes deemed to enhance or reduce drinkability (All figures: Doemens)

It should be plainly apparent that drinkability is not an isolated sensory impression but rather the result of a balanced interaction between attributes that enhance it and those that reduce it. An immediate visual assessment of a beer's sensory balance is made possible simply by dividing the spider web diagram into two halves. The green half contains attributes that enhance drinkability (right side of the web), and the blue half includes those that reduce drinkability (left side of the web).

The green side features descriptors that, based on experience, have a positive effect on drinking pleasure: a fine-pored, stable head of foam, a fresh overall impression, fresh yeast notes, lively carbonation, appropriate body, a hop aroma typical of the style, a rounded bitterness and a subtle fruitiness. These attributes create freshness, balance and a sensory "flow" that encourages drinking to continue.

On the blue side are factors that reduce the pleasure in drinking a beer, such as autolyzed yeast, metallic notes, bread crust and oxidized-malty tones, as well as overly intense honey and biscuit aromas – particularly the "cardboard" aroma – and astringent tannins. These attributes diminish the perception of freshness and make the beer appear more complex and less well-rounded from a sensory perspective.

Color and sweetness fall into the transition zone between green and blue. A bright yellow to golden color reinforces the association with freshness. If the hue of a light beer drifts toward deeper gold or amber, this is interpreted as a sign of oxidation and correlates with decreased drinkability. The same applies to sweetness: moderate residual sweetness stabilizes the body and buffers the bitterness, while excessive sweetness accelerates the feeling of satiation.

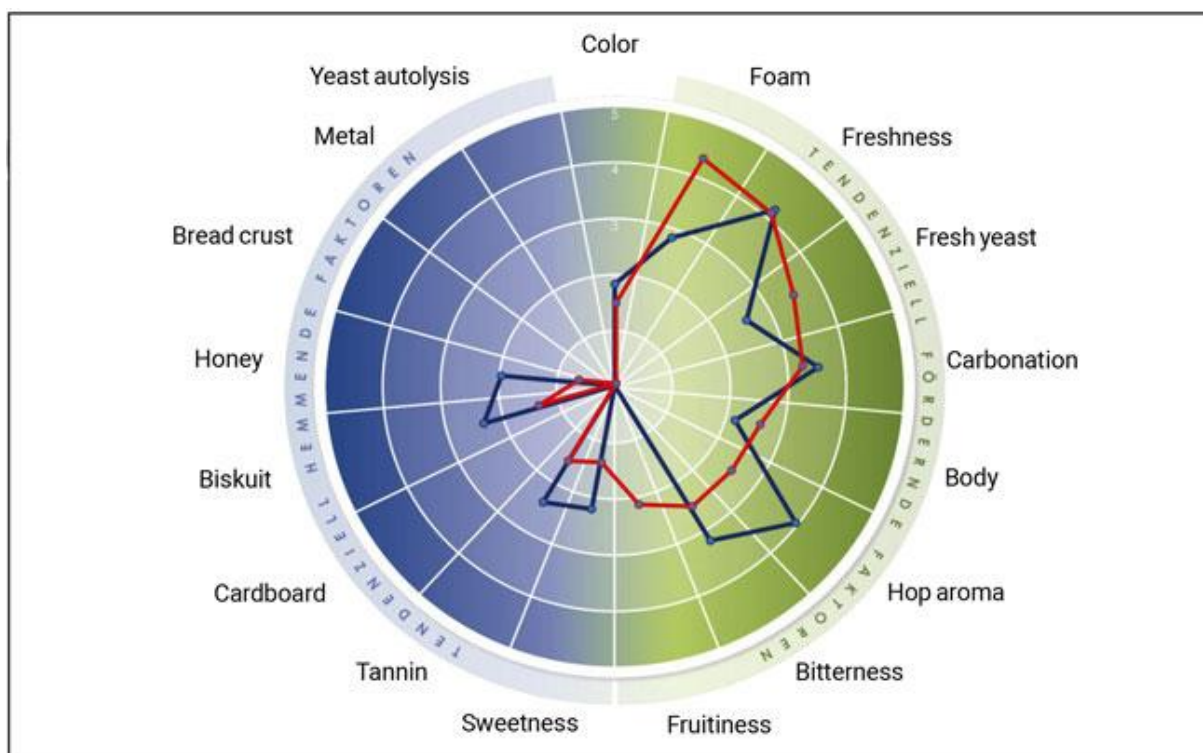


Fig. 2 Drinkability Check, Brewery A, Helles: results from the initial tasting (blue): 83.0 points, results from the current tasting (red): 92.7 points

Drinkability check in practice

Fig. 2 shows the spider web diagram for a Helles. The blue plot represents the initial tasting of the beer. This served as the starting point. The results were then analyzed from a technical perspective and adjusted in small steps over subsequent years. The red plot shows the current status following quality-enhancing measures.

Parallel to this trial, an evaluation was conducted using the Doemens 100-point scale. The score rose from 83.0 to 92.7 points. The underlying technological measures taken over the years have been diverse and are beyond the scope of this article.

This progress is clearly reflected in the spider web diagram: The red plot is more pronounced on the green side and, at the same time, more harmonious, while the deviations toward the blue, the descriptors indicating a reduction in drinkability, are smaller. The rounder shape of the total plot represents sensory balance and correlates with increased consumer acceptance.

Fig. 3 shows two spider web diagrams for a beer. This time, the product was tasted fresh and after a natural aging period of 172 days.

The score dropped from 92.6 to 86.0 points. Accordingly, the plot on the spider web diagram shifted toward the blue hemisphere. Freshness and effervescence decreased, while the oxidative notes increased.

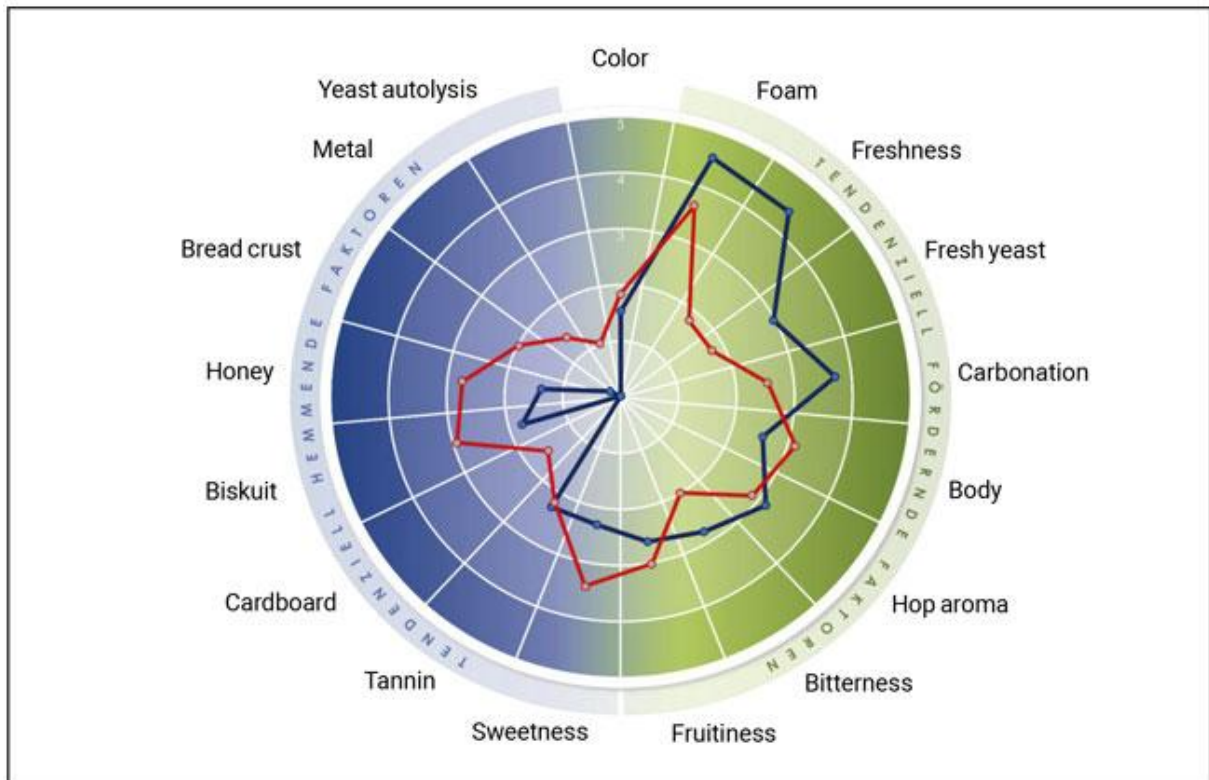


Fig. 3 Drinkability Check, Brewery A, Helles: fresh (blue) 92.6 points and after aging for 172 days (red) 86.0 points

This type of tasting effectively illustrates the expected decline in drinkability over time. However, other aged tasting samples yielded a different result.

One could call this a temporary “peak of maturity,” as shown in fig. 4. The beer aged for 103 days was rated at 82.5 points, while the beer aged for 172 days was rated at 86.0 points. After reaching a low point, drinkability increased once again.

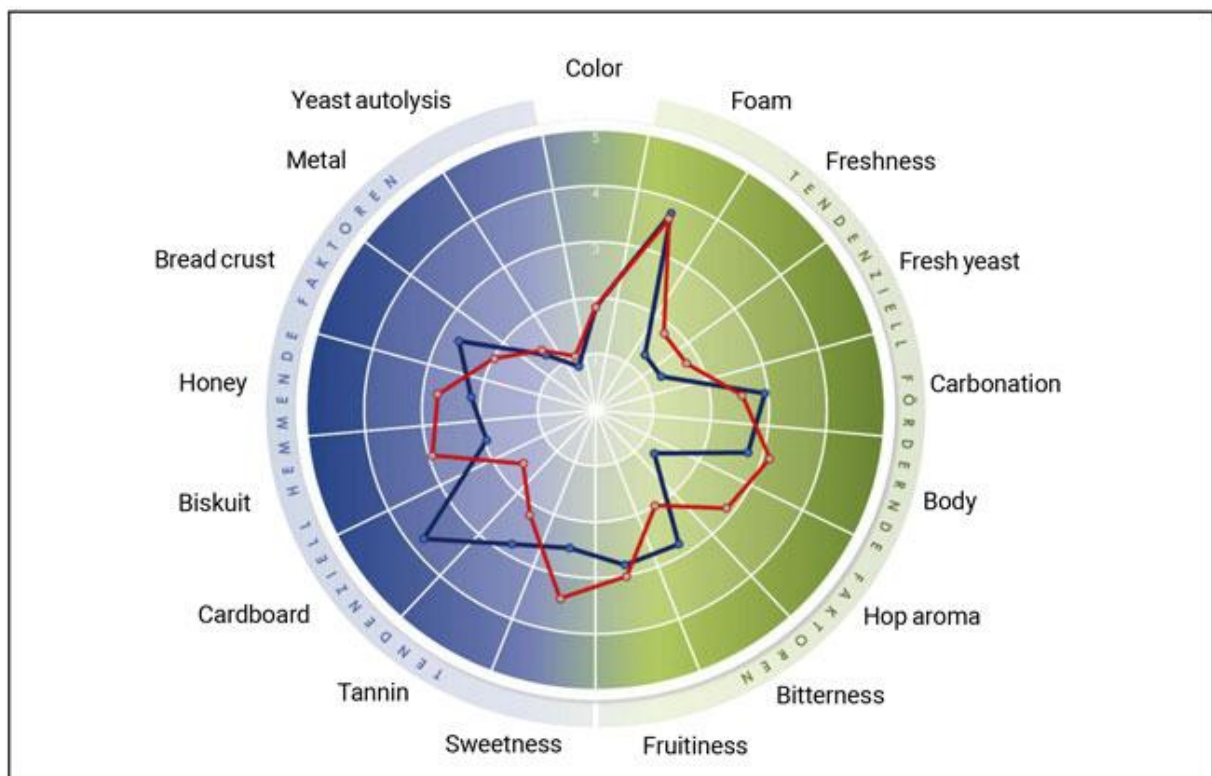


Fig. 4 Drinkability Check, Brewery A, Helles: beer samples aged for 103 days (blue) 82.5 points and for 172 days (red) 86.0 points

The supplementary bar diagram (fig. 5) shows that the body and sweetness remain relatively constant over long periods but increase significantly in the “172-day beer”, as do the biscuit and honey notes. At the same time, the sensory impression of cardboard decreases.

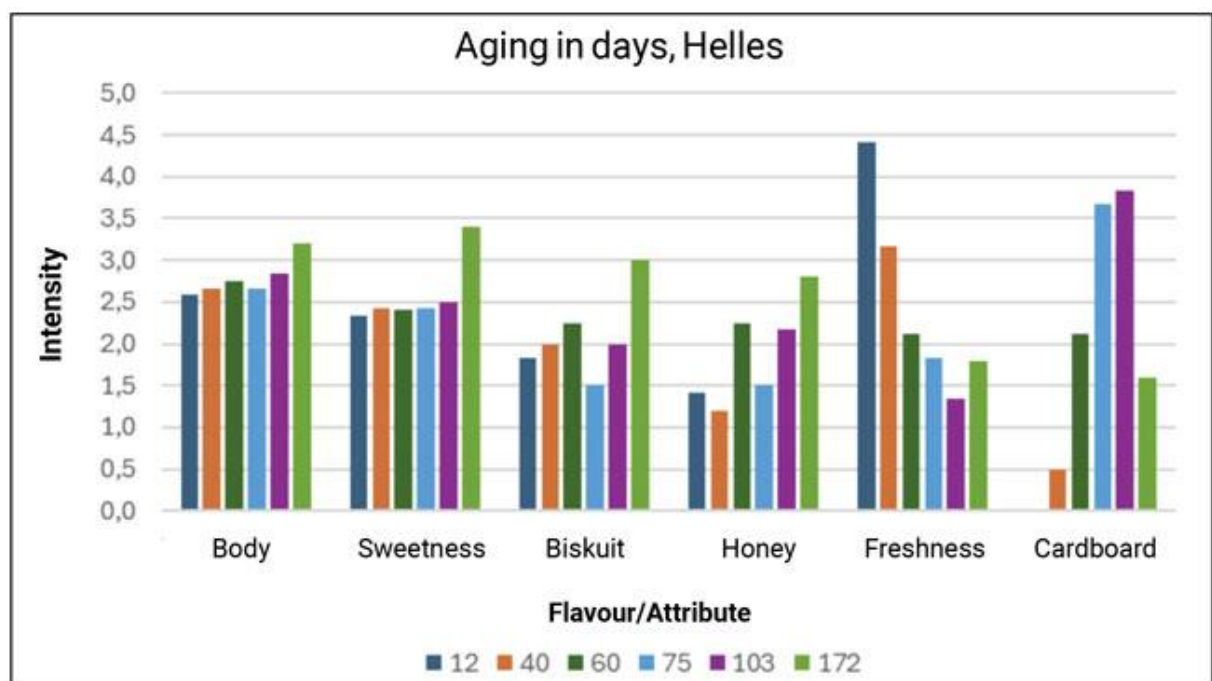


Fig. 5 The aging process in days, Brewery A, Helles

From a chemical perspective, the underlying carbonyl compounds have not disappeared but are masked by other sensory elements. Honey and biscuit aromas are not necessarily considered negative and can actually enhance the style of malt-forward lager or export beers. The increase in body further enhances the mouthfeel. It is important to emphasize that this observation does not seem to apply to all beer styles; in hop-forward styles, the same aging process would be viewed much more critically.

These trials show that the timing and magnitude of such a peak depend heavily upon the brewery, oxygen management, filling equipment, redox potential and beer style. Generally speaking, once this point is passed, the sensory quality declines steadily.

Fig. 5 shows an example from a single brewery, but this trend can be observed at many breweries. The more a brewery focuses on oxygen management, the more positive the effect on beer quality. This is nothing new. What is new is that a trained panel can make specific assessments on this topic. The Doemens Tasting Panel, composed of highly trained and experienced sensory experts, tests these theoretical hypotheses in a practical setting.

The combination of the 100-point scale and the spider web diagram thus provides far more than just a snapshot. While the score quantifies overall quality, the spider web diagram visualizes the causes in detail. This information provides transparency regarding shifts in attributes which enhance or reduce a beer's drinkability. It follows that drinkability can indeed be measured as a manageable quality metric along the process chain – with direct application to consumer acceptance and the beer's market potential.

Conclusion

Sensory evaluation of beers is still a topic in many breweries which has little influence on actual practice. It is carried out but has little technological relevance. This is partly because breweries don't trust their own tasting results.

Through targeted training of the sensory panel and appropriately defined questions, valid results can be obtained that can be applied to improve product quality. Sensory analysis is and remains the method that best reflects consumer perception.

The Doemens Tasting Panel is available to small and medium-sized breweries to provide reliable tasting results. Larger breweries can use it to calibrate their own panels. Thus, the Drinkability Check provides an important, comparable quality standard!

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