

How to pour the perfect PINT: Legendary black beer will bask in limelight tomorrow

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On St. Patrick's Day on Thursday, Canadians at pubs across the country will consume an estimated 1.8 million pints of that heavy, dark elixir known as Guinness.

It may sound like a lot of beer for one day of festivities, but it's really just a drop in the bucket when you consider more than 10 million pints of Guinness are sold daily around the world, at a rate of 116 pints per second.

What is it about this brand that makes it Canada's No. 1 imported draught beer and, for many, the Irish beer of choice?

According to Guinness brewmaster Fergal Murray, it's the combination of its taste, texture and distinctive presentation that makes the Guinness experience so special.

"Guinness is unique. It looks so different, with its white, creamy head and black body. Most people drink it with their eyes first," says Murray, who was visiting Canada from Dublin last week.

"And, of course, Guinness isn't just a beer. It's an experience. That's why so much of it is enjoyed on special occasions such as St. Patrick's Day."

Part of the Guinness appeal also lies in the distinctive process of pouring the perfect pint -- a skill Murray has taught to staff at more than 1,500 pubs and demonstrated to audiences in the first-ever Guinness television ad.

There are no fewer than six steps to this systematic process.

"You try to pour it any other way and you're not doing it justice," says Murray, who has held the brewmaster job for nearly 20 years.

Because Murray was unable to show us how to pour in person, we enlisted the mastery of Craig Riopel, manager of Fionn MacCool's at Calgary's Sheraton Suites Hotel, to demonstrate the procedure.

The first step is to start with a cool, dry, clean glass -- no fingerprints, please, and no detergent residue that might interfere with the look of the drink.

It's all about the presentation, which means serving it in the appropriate 20-ounce tulip-shaped Guinness-branded glass.

“Anything else would be considered a major faux pas,” says Riopel.

Next is the angle at which you hold the glass under the tap, which should be at 45 degrees.

Then comes the third and most important step of the pour: Pull the tap forward all the way down until the glass is three-quarters full, and the liquid is just touching the tip of the back of the glass.

Bring the glass down and out, allowing for the fourth step to take place: Permit the surge to settle until there is no more carbonation left.

Each beer is poured using a combination of 75 per cent nitrogen gas and 25 per cent carbon dioxide.

That’s what creates the cascading effect of the beer as it settles and the creamy head forms on top.

It takes just shy of two minutes -- “approximately 119 seconds,” says Riopel -- until the liquid goes from molten brown to solid black.

The fifth step involves the top-up, a.k.a. the second pour: Pull the tap one-third of the way toward you; fill with beer proud of the rim, meaning the creamy head should sit about half an inch over the top of the rim, but not in danger of spilling over.

And then, of course, the presentation: The glass of beer is rested on top of the bar with the label facing the customer.

That’s the standard way of perfecting the Guinness pour, but Fionn MacCool’s, like many Irish pubs, adds a seventh step by drawing a shamrock on top of the foam.

For the 364 other days of the year, Jim Aird, its resident bartender by day, can draw anything from a harp to the Flames logo in the suds.

The trick is to think of it as “moving the paper around the pen, not the pen around the paper,” says Riopel.

If your chosen piece de resistance is a shamrock, start in the middle, draw a figure eight sideways, then half a figure eight from the top, ending with a stem on the bottom.

Finally, sit back and enjoy. Ideally, Guinness should be served at three to five degrees Celsius.

Though many people mistakenly think of Guinness as a meal in a glass, the drink is remarkably low in calories. At 196 calories per glass, it clocks in at less than what is contained in a glass of one per cent milk or orange juice. “That’s what women who drink it are first turned on to it by,” says Riopel.

Of course, if you’re the brewmaster at Guinness, you’ll be drinking it more often than anyone else. For Murray, an essential part of his job is quality control, which entails having to taste every batch of Guinness made. To this day, he rhapsodizes about the libation, referring to it lovingly as a “lovely, ruby-red-black liquid.”

“Guinness seems to transcend boundaries,” he says.

“It’s a fun product that’s connected with the Irish joy in life.”