

TAKING A CRACK AT

There's only so far you can go on raw talent alone. Relentless practice and extreme devotion are keys to mastering any skill — even beer drinking.

That's what sets the 2 female and 11 male Master Cicerones apart from the rest of the suds-swilling herds: a relentless drive to sharpen one's palate and correctly identify the often invisible, but always crucial elements of beer-making, from troubleshooting draft system design to advanced food pairing. Since 2009, over 150 people have attempted the Master exam, two of whom hail from right here in the Capital of Craft — San Diego.

George Thornton (owner/brewer at Home Brewing Company and owner of The Homebrewer) and Morgan Tenwick (Quality Control Manager at Modern Times Beer), both already certified Beer Judges and high-level Cicerones, have attempted to join the illustrious ranks who have earned the title "Master Cicerone" — the highest level of beer certification offered by the Cicerone Certification Program, and thus the most advanced in the world — and spoke with me about their history in beer, their training processes, the grueling exam schedule, and ultimately their results.



What got you into beer in the first place?

GEORGE: I've always had a fascination with European beer culture for as long as I can remember. At least since the age of 12, I can recall thinking that German beer gardens and British pubs must be some of the best places in the entire world, and that some of the most brilliant thoughts must have been conjured in the company of like-minded friends around a good beer. Thus far, my experiences have revealed that this is true.

MORGAN: I began to discover and appreciate local breweries sometime around 2008. I still remember my first visit to the original AleSmith location and thinking how cool it was that the beer could be so diverse and take on so many different flavors. Being a scientist, it made me curious about where these flavors came from, and I started to casually play around with homebrewing. I really just fell in love with the whole process, and "I haven't seen you in awhile, let's grab a beer" became a regular part of my vocabulary.

When did you first become a Cicerone?

MORGAN: I took the online Certified Beer Server exam (Level 1) in October 2014, the Certified Cicerone exam in April 2015, and then took the Advanced Cicerone exam in February 2016. I received my passing Level 3 results in April 2016 and then enrolled to take the Master exam in October. [It's been] almost exactly two years in total from Level 1 to sitting for the Master exam.

GEORGE: I started studying for the Cicerone in 2012 by first studying for the Beer Judge Certification Program (BJCP). The Cicerone program uses the BJCP guidelines for their style questions, and it's a great way to start developing techniques that will improve your palate.

[After passing the Certified Cicerone exam in 2014], I turned my focus back to the BJCP in order to gain more experience and to tap into the already well organized BJCP/homebrew community in San Diego. There are probably more BJCP study groups in San Diego than Cicerone study groups. I think this is because of the amazing homebrew community in San Diego, and homebrew clubs like QUAFF, Mash Heads, Society of Barley Engineers, Suds Sorority and more.

What made you decide to pursue becoming a Master Cicerone?

GEORGE: I felt that it would be a good template for guiding my interest in learning more about beer. It would give me a place to start and a target for where to finish (although, I'll never stop learning more about beer). I also realized that there are no Master Cicerones in San Diego. It would be great to be one of the first, but I think that it's even more important that others are encouraged to take after me/us. At least I can now be a resource for those that want to know more about the process.

Justin Evelyn of Bagby Beer Company took the exam with me in 2015. We both did very well,

but neither of us passed. He is a proctor for the Certified Cicerone exams in San Diego, so many people are familiar with his hard work.

MORGAN: Before my career in beer, I was working as a chemist in the biotech industry. When I made that first jump into the beer industry, my friends and family thought I had lost my mind. But I started reading every brewing book I could get my hands on, and I fell in love. Beer is both a science and an art. It's precision and it's creativity. It's one of the oldest drinks in the world and has been deeply ingrained in human history, but it's also something that never will never fall stagnant, because there is no limits or bounds to what you can do with those four ingredients. So I wanted to learn as much as possible to further my own career and to satisfy my own curiosity. When I learned of the Cicerone program, I figured I may as well apply my studying into something concrete that I could work towards [and] enrolled in the Certified Cicerone exam in Spring 2015.

What was your preparation process like?

GEORGE: A weekly study group that included a lot of blind tasting, cheese/meat/beer pairings, and discussion. We filled our fridge with over 50 beers wrapped in foil that I could grab at any moment to blind taste. I geared the curriculum for the San Diego State University Beer Styles to emphasize style/history that I thought would best reflect the interests of the Cicerone program. I also re-skinned about 20 beer books and spent more time revisiting a core selection of texts. Also lots of flash cards, and

BECOMING A MASTER CICERONE

By Beth Demmon

surrounding myself with a lot of very, very smart beer people.

MORGAN: [When I got my Advanced Cicerone passing results in April 2016, I figured I would maybe consider taking the Master exam later on in my career, but didn't have any intention of taking it anytime soon. I got a text from George on some random weekday in August, telling me that seats had opened up for the Master exam in October. At first I thought he was crazy because I didn't think I was anywhere near ready. But after a few motivating texts from George, I went from "no way dude" to "why not, can't hurt to try" and then enrolled the next day with a little under 10 weeks to prepare.

Working at a brewery and being surrounded by beer on a daily basis is definitely a huge advantage. I also have some incredibly smart, talented, passionate, and supportive friends in different aspects of the beer industry that I am constantly learning from and using as resources. Just drinking beer and talking about beer with friends in a casual, but educational setting has been one of the most beneficial parts of my preparation process. Beyond that, it was just a lot of reading...we definitely crammed for the last few weeks leading to the exam with lots of flash cards and late night sessions.

What was the exam like?

MORGAN: The exam itself is two days long, eight hours per day. Each day consists of three hours of written essay exam, three hours of oral/demonstration exams, a total of one hour

of tasting exams (four exams at 15 minutes each), and a one-hour lunch break.

The morning of the first exam day, George and I arrived 45 minutes early. It was 7 in the morning in Chicago in late October, so...cold and windy. We ran to the nearest coffee shop for shelter, drank some coffee, did a little last minute flash card review, and really just tried to make terrible jokes to lighten the mood and calm each other down.

When we got to the exam, they sat us in a room with a few long community-style benchtop tables and gave us some time to sign in, turn in our personal belongings, eat some breakfast, drink MORE coffee, get to know each other, etc. At that point, the group is split into two groups. The first group spends the first half of their day with the written exams and the second group with the oral/demonstration exams.

I was in the first group, and jumped right into three straight hours of written essays. I believe there were a total of seven or eight long essays where you need to address as much information as possible, in a coherent way, while keeping track of your time to get to each question. This was mentally exhausting, for obvious reasons, but also physically exhausting, i.e. blisters and hand cramps. We were then given two 15-minute tasting exams and a lunch break.

The second half of the day is three cumulative hours of oral/demonstration exams where you rotate through various stations and have to verbally answer an onslaught of questions and

or perform different tasks, from identifying and talking through the different parts of a brewhouse, to preparing a cask for serving, troubleshooting a faulty long-draw draught system, identifying raw ingredients and recipe design, explaining beer styles, food pairings...you name it.

I found this to be extremely difficult. In a written essay setting, you at least have some time to prepare a response, sort through your thoughts, even erase and correct mistakes as you go. In a face-to-face interview setting, I found myself walking out of a few of the sessions thinking, "what did I just say!?" or the second you walk out, that one answer pops into your head and you want to run back in and yell, "wait, I got it!", but it's too late and you're already switching mental gears to head into the next interview or demonstration. This process was nerve-wracking, but also incredibly fun and exhilarating.

The day ends with two more 15 minute tasting exams, and everyone heads home in a daze to get some rest for day two.

The second day is a near replica in format with all new material. At the end of the second day, the examiners take time to answer questions, give us a pat on the back, and then they pour everyone a shot of Malort. If you've never had Malort, consider yourself lucky. It's horrible. It's like someone took grapefruit pith and concentrated it down to the most bitter substance on earth and then mixed it with black licorice and mud. But we all did it together because it's tradition.

Then we all walked as fast as we could to the nearest bar and drank, laughed at each other for willingly subjecting ourselves to that kind of stress, drank some more, and vowed that those of us that didn't pass would be back next year to do it all again.

What were some of the other Cicerone exams like and how did you prepare for those? How would you recommend others prepare for them?

MORGAN: The Level 1 exam is an online quiz covering the basics of draught maintenance and serving beer, and a little on styles. There wasn't any real preparation for this one, as most of the material I had learned from barending, but it's something that anyone could quickly pass with a quick overview of the basics. I prepared for Level 2 for ~6 months, during which I studied almost completely on my own with help from a few colleagues that had previously taken the exam. Passing the Certified exam opened up some doors for me and my career, and motivated me to keep going.

GEORGE: The Certified Level exam is essentially a mini version of the Master exam. The scope of expected knowledge is easily 3-4 times wider, and the level of expertise on each topic is also increased. I recommend that those studying for the Certified level combine the 10-week Study Guide from the BJCP with an overlay of the Cicerone Syllabus and Practice Exam. That should be sufficient to prepare.

George, since this was your second time taking the exam, what were some of the

differences between this time and your first attempt?

GEORGE: The exam itself has proven to be one of the most fun, exciting, challenging, and stimulating experiences I can think of. I can say that for both times that I took it. The first time I was so nervous on day one that I certainly flubbed on a few interviews, so for day two and for attempt number two, I did my best to stay in a positive mood and to just focus on having fun with the experience. I scored 81 points on that first attempt (you need 85 to pass). That's a great score, but you have to do better to pass.

I realized that for the second time around, I had to practice being comfortable talking about the various aspects and with having my answers critiqued on the spot. I had friends practice drilling me with a "20 Questions"-style interrogation on specific topics. Essentially they would just keep asking "why" with every response, until we found the edges of my knowledge. Then I would try to assess whether that knowledge was important to the core mission of the Cicerone program, which is to educate and excite consumers about craft beer. The test material is broad, and so vast, that it is impossible to guess what questions will be asked.

I can say that it is absolutely humbling to talk about, write about, and taste beer for nine hours a day, two days in a row, and then at the end of it feel like I know absolutely NOTHING about beer!

What would it mean for you to become a Master?

GEORGE: It means that people can count on me to help steer their beer journey in a direction they may not have known existed, and that hopefully adds value to their lives in subtle or profound ways. I also want the title because I feel like some people are too snobby, pretentious, braggadocious, and loud about their beer knowledge and how they treat others. It can be a real turn-off. If I am Master Cicerone in the room, then perhaps I can set the tone for how to talk about beer enthusiastically, but to also keep it calm and rooted. I want people to feel welcome and encouraged to learn.

It's just beer, after all. Beer is my livelihood, my social network, my passion...but it's still just beer.

MORGAN: I initially took the Certified exam because I knew that it would help propel my career in the industry and open up new doors and opportunities. I need to be able to understand all aspects of the process, from brewing, yeast management, product consistency and troubleshooting, draught maintenance and design, microbiology, sensory, and just being able to drink a beer and describe it to someone else in an approachable way. The certifications have helped me in demonstrating that I've put in the energy and dedication to gathering and applying that broad range of knowledge.

I do it because I love it, and I do it because I want to be able to help others learn to love it as well. •

Unfortunately, neither Thornton or Tenwick passed the Master exam this time around (Thornton and Bagby's Justin Evelyn are both planning another attempt this fall), but with a burning desire to further their own knowledge in order to enrich the already stellar San Diego craft beer scene — where the only Advanced Cicerone to date is female — there's no doubt we as a city are already benefiting from their expertise and enthusiasm.

Beth Demmon is a San Diego-based food and drink writer who loves craft beer and motorcycles (not necessarily enjoyed together). View her work at bethdemmon.com or follow her on Instagram at [@ibethdemmon](https://www.instagram.com/ibethdemmon).