

Mirella Amato is the first Master Cicerone to visit New Zealand.



How to find flavour

NEW ZEALAND brewers and bars will need to be on their toes this week when Canadian beer expert Mirella Amato touches down for a five-day visit.

Amato is the first woman to qualify as a certified Cicerone (beer sommelier) and first non-US resident to become a Master Cicerone. In short, she knows beer. And in particular she's something of an expert at identifying faults in beer.

She's coming here to speak at the ScienceTeller Festival in Dunedin (scienceteller.com) where she will talk on the science of beer, with a tasting to help, next Sunday. But she's also here to learn more about New Zealand beer – especially as the last time she was here, 2004, was like the stone age for the craft industry.

"I see it as a great opportunity to discover new things and expand my palate, especially with those New Zealand hops which are causing quite a stir around the world right now."

Amato's classes, under the Beerology banner (beerology.ca), are about teaching people how to identify flavours. While we all have different palates, and some of us are more "natural" tasters, it's possible to learn how to taste beer like an expert.

"Some people are better tasters than others but I liken it to drawing – some people are naturally talented at drawing but you can also learn to draw if you practice enough.

"The hardest thing with beer is expressing what you are tasting. I see people who go 'oh, I know what that flavour is . . .' but it really bugs them that they cannot articulate what it is. I try to teach people to identify the flavour and then put it in to words."

A few years ago Amato identified



Mirella Amato.

Photo: Jennifer Roberts

a gap in the market for identifying faults, many of which, she says, are so subtle most people will not notice them. She trained herself by experiencing "high level" faults and then trying to find them at lower levels.

By her estimation, based on her experience in Canada, around 30 per cent of beer at any one time will be "off" either because of a fault in the brewery or because of what's happened in the bar. "The number one issue I see at the moment is dirty lines," she says, adding that stale beer is the next sin. Both problems are, ironically, caused by the rise in popularity of craft beer.

"A bar might have once sold just one or two beers on tap and the stock was fast-moving, but now they'll have six or seven taps and the beer moves more slowly so you get more problems with oxidised or stale beer."

Dunedin bar managers – you have been warned.

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