Choose the Right Homebrew Kit

By Billy Broas
Homebrew Academy Founder
Ask anyone how to get into homebrewing and chances are you’ll get this answer – “Get a kit.”

Let’s face it, we love kits. As beginners undertaking a new project they are incredibly convenient. Everything we need is in one nice tidy package. Whether it’s brewing beer, making model airplanes, or starting a salt water aquarium – kits are a great way to get started.

The problem with “Get a kit” is that it’s not that simple.

Most people never tell you which type of kit to get. And yes, it makes a big difference.

**Beer Kits Have Come a Long Ways**

I wasn’t around in the early days of homebrewing, but have heard stories. They are more like horror stories. My Dad and uncles tell me stories of the “beer” they made in college. Only a college kid’s resilience could handle such an awful creation.

There were no raw ingredients – everything came in a can which they then mixed with hot water to create a soupy beer-like substance. Some dry yeast sprinkled into a bucket added alcohol and made the mixture into beer. Sanitation wasn’t a big concern back then, so the beer often came out of the bottle with a rancid infection.

Luckily, things have changed.
The beer kits on the market today are more advanced and the ingredients are much higher quality. Unfortunately, the horror stories from the past remain, so when people bring up “homebrewing” there is usually someone in the crowd who shoots them down about how crappy the beer is.

“I tried that once. It tasted like cat piss!” The potential hombrewer is often discouraged at this news, and give up on homebrewing as a result.

This is too bad, because it’s simply not true. Remember this – today’s kits have evolved greatly from the past. You can now make better beer than ever at home, with little risk of a horror story.

The rise in the popularity of homebrewing has led to better kits, which make better beer. A key feature of these kits is that they closely mimic the way the pros brew. That’s not too surprising is it? Professional brewers make the best beer, so it’s no wonder that a good homebrewing kit resembles how the pros do it.

What are you goals for homebrewing?

Answer the following questions:

1. Do you want to make beer just for a cheap source of booze?
2. Do you only drink mass-produced light American lagers like Budweiser, Miller, Coors, Michelob, Icehouse, or Busch?
3. Do you want to make beer that you would be proud to share with your friends?
4. Do you typically drink higher quality beer, known as craft beer, like Sierra Nevada, Sam Adams, Dogfish Head, Stone, or Bell’s?
5. Are you interested in brewing different styles of beer, creating your own recipes, and learning about brewing in the process?
Your answers will determine what beer kit you should get. If you answered “No” to 1 & 2, and “Yes” to 3-5, then there is a certain type of kit you should buy, and another type you should avoid.

If you’re just in it to make cheap booze or you don’t care about the flavor of your beer, then I can’t help you. That’s not what I teach.

Let’s talk about these two different kit styles.

**All kits aren’t created equal**

We’ve established that you are 1) a craft beer fan who appreciates high quality beer and wants to make something similar, and 2) you’re not interested in making beer *just* for the booze.

There are two general categories of kits. The best way to compare them is with an analogy. Let’s go with something everyone can relate to – cooking. After all, beer is very similar to cooking. It’s often called liquid bread, which is actually very accurate.

Think about making soup at home. One option is to buy a can of a Campbells vegetable soup. It’s cheap, it’s easy to make, and you don’t need to have any ingredients besides a bowl, microwave, and spoon.
Now think about your grandmother making soup from scratch. She goes to the market and hand picks all of the vegetables. Then she goes home, washes the veggies, and chops them up. She carefully measures out the herbs and spices. This is all done the very same day so everything is nice and fresh.

Which soup do you think tastes better?

Campbells can’t touch Granny’s delicious vegetable soup. It’s the same with beer making kits.

The first category of kits make beer in a similar method as canned soup. I also like to compare these kits to Easy Bake Ovens. You remember Easy Bake Ovens, right? It’s got everything you need to start baking, but the taste isn’t exactly stunning.

The other type kits allow you to make beer the way the pros make it. With these kits you’re like Grandma in the kitchen, or a Chef at a restaurant using raw ingredients. Let’s explore these two types of kits more. We’ll call them:

1. Easy Bake Oven Kits
2. Chef’s Kits
Easy Bake Oven Kits

These are the kits that get most of the attention. They’re the ones you see in stores like K-mart, Bed Bath and Beyond, and department stores. The undisputed king of the Easy Bake Oven kits is Mr. Beer. Two other very common ones are The Beer Machine and Coopers.

Since Mr. Beer is the king, let’s take a quick look at how it works (Click here if you need a quick refresher on how beer is made). The ingredients used in Mr. Beer are:

1. A proprietary product called Mr. Beer “Booster”
2. Hopped malt extract (HME)
3. Dry brewing yeast
4. One-Step sanitizer

Process:

1. Sanitize equipment with One-Step no-rinse sanitizer
2. Dissolve the Booster in boiling water in a pot
3. Mix the HME into the pot with the Booster
4. Pour the mixture into the keg and top off with cold water
5. Add the yeast
6. Allow 7 days to ferment
7. When ready to bottle, sanitize the plastic bottles that are provided
8. Add granulated sugar to each bottle
9. Fill each bottle from the Mr. beer tap, screw on cap, let sit 7 days to carbonate
10. Chill and bottle
Here’s a video of the process in action. You’ll see it’s a very simple process, and maybe even too simple for someone hoping to satisfy his or her creative desires.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kit</th>
<th>Kit Price/Ingredient Price/ Batch Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Beer</td>
<td>$49.95*/$19.99/2 gallons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coopers</td>
<td>$99/$27.99/6 gallons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beer Machine</td>
<td>$114.95/$32.95/2.6 gallons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Comes with ingredient kit

**Chef’s Kit**

Chef’s kits more closely mimic the way professional brewers make beer. Your role is truly more like a chef – using raw ingredients, timing how long you cook (brew), and getting creative with recipes.

There are many companies that make Chef’s Kits. Here is a typical equipment list from [MoreBeer.com](http://www.MoreBeer.com) ($109):

- Bottle of Star San Sanitizer (4oz)
- 3/8” Plastic Bottle Filler
- Bag of Bottle Caps (1/4lb)
- Bottle Capper
- Reusable Mesh Steeping Bag
- Reusable Mesh Hop Bags
- Plastic Spoon
- Funnel
- Bottle Brush
- Plastic Carboy
- Package of Powdered Brewery Wash (PBW)
- Plastic Bottling/Sanitation Bucket with Spigot
- Airlock
- Rubber Stopper with Hole
- Hydrometer
- Hydrometer Jar
- 5ft Vinyl Transfer Tubing
- Sterile Siphon Starter
- 5 inch long dial thermometer

As you can see, there is quite a bit more equipment involved. This is because with Chef’s kits, you are working from raw ingredients and have more control over the brewing process.

You are more like the Chef in the kitchen. The onions don’t come precut, so you need a knife. The soup isn’t pre-mixed, so you’ll need a pot. But working from these raw ingredients will give you a much better product. Speaking of ingredients, here is a typical ingredient kit that comes with a Chef’s kit like that from MoreBeer.com:

**Specialty Grains:**

- 8 oz Crystal 40L
- 8 oz Caravienne
- 4 oz Victory
- 4 oz Chocolate Malt
Hops:
- 1 oz Northern Brewer (Bittering Hop)
- .5 oz Willamette (Flavor Hop)
- .5 oz Willamette (Aroma Hop)

Yeast:
- Liquid English Ale Yeast

Carbonation:
- 4 oz Corn Sugar, added at bottling time

A generalized process for making beer from one of these kits looks like this:
1. Clean and then sanitize all equipment
2. Steep the specialty grains in hot water
3. Bring the water to a boil and add the malt extract
4. Add the 60 minute hop additions (bittering hops)
5. Add the remaining hop additions (flavor and aroma hops)
6. Add the whirfloc or Irish moss clarifier
7. Cool the wort down to 70°F in an ice bath
8. Pour the wort into the carboy fermentor and top off with water
9. Add the liquid yeast, insert the airlock, and store the beer to ferment
10. Transfer the beer to the bottling bucket and add priming sugar
11. Fill each bottle, cap it, and then store to carbonate and condition
12. Chill and drink

The similarity between the Mr. Beer and MoreBeer kits is that they both use malt extract. Malt extract is a syrupy-substance made from grains and water. The sugars are extracted out of the grains and the water is evaporated, leaving the syrupy product known as malt extract. The extract contains the sugars that get turned into alcohol. Malt Extract is also responsible for adding aroma, flavor, and body to the beer.
The biggest difference between the Mr. Beer kit and the MoreBeer kit is the use of specialty grains, hops, and liquid yeast. In the Mr. Beer kit, the malt extract comes with hops already added, so there is no need to add them during brewing. This is a big drawback as fresh hops are crucial in making great beer. If you want to make a hoppy beer like an IPA, using a hopped malt extract will leave you disappointed.

The other difference is the specialty grains. Although malt extract is a processed ingredient and not raw, it is of high quality and can make delicious beer. The key is to use malt extract as the base of the beer and mainly for its sugar content. Much of the rest of the malt character including color, aroma, and flavor, should come from specialty grains. The use of specialty grains in addition to unhopped malt extract can make commercial quality beer.

Liquid yeast is usually preferable to dry yeast. The reason is there is far more variety in liquid yeast, so you can match the yeast to the beer style. In the example above, English Ale yeast is used for this traditionally British style of beer. This yeast adds fruity flavors. To make it more Americanized, you can use American yeast, which is more flavor-neutral. This is a level of flexibility that you don’t have with dry yeast.

**Key takeaway:**

Unhopped malt extract + specialty grains + hops + liquid yeast = Great beer.

Hopped malt extract + no specialty grains + dry yeast = Not as good beer.
What about cost & difficulty?

Here I’ve been talking about these two types of kits, obviously favoring the Chef’s kits, but without mentioning a couple important factors: cost and difficulty.

Sure Easy Bake Oven kits don’t make beer that is quite as good, but isn’t that the trade off? You get to test the hobby with less money to see if you like it and can decide to upgrade your kit if you want to. Also, the Easy Bake kits are easier, so you can learn the process, get better at it, and then upgrade to a real kit when you’re ready.

That sounds logical, but it’s not as clear cut as you might think.

Here’s a point I need to address before I get a bunch of nasty emails. I’ve had this beer kit conversation with many people and somebody always says, “But [insert great brewer’s name] started with Mr. Beer and look how good he is!”

**There are tons of great brewers that started out with the Easy Bake Oven kits.** I’ve met dozens of them whose skill far exceeds my own. Hell, my homebrewing idol Jamil Zainascheff started out on Mr. Beer. But that’s not the point.

All of these people became great brewers because they eventually moved on to a Chef’s style kit. Also, when they got started many of them simply didn’t know better. They got Mr. Beer as a gift or saw it in a department store. They didn’t know about the other types of kits.
It got them into the hobby, but I bet you many of them would admit that if they had to do it again, they would start out with a Chef’s kit. Many of them only made 1 or 2 batches before they upgraded and put their Mr. Beer equipment in the closet where it is collecting dust.

Now I know what you’re thinking – you’re not sure if you’re going to like homebrewing. You may not stick with it, so you don’t want to invest a bunch of money up front. To play it safe, you’re thinking about choosing one of the Easy Bake Oven kits because they are cheaper.

**Here’s what I recommend:** If you think there is a chance, even a small chance, of you upgrading to one of the Chef’s kits, then buy one right off the bat.

Here’s why:

**Ability to upgrade**

The Easy Bake Oven kits lock you into their system. When you want to upgrade, there is very little that carries over. That means none of the value of the Mr. Beer can be used if you upgrade to a Chef’s kit.

If you lose or damage one piece with a Chef’s kit, you can easily replace it without buying a whole new kit. If you eventually want to upgrade to all-grain brewing, almost all of your kit can be used for all-grain. You’ll need to buy new equipment, but all of your old equipment is still useful with the possible exception of your brew pot. A pot is versatile item though, and you can still use it for spaghetti parties.
So the equipment you receive in a Chef’s kit will stay with you as you grow, whereas the Easy Bake Oven equipment has little use down the road.

**Flexibility**

The Chef’s kits give you great flexibility in terms of what types of beer you can brew. With Mr. Beer, you’ll need to choose from their list of ingredient kits. MoreBeer.com also offers pre-packed ingredient kits, but you are not limited to those. You can choose to piece together a published recipe from raw ingredients or make up your own. When you work from raw ingredients, you’re not limited in what you can brew.

**Cost**

Cost is a huge factor in deciding which kit to buy. After all, this is an entirely new venture for you and you’re not sure you’re going to stick with it. Let’s do a cost breakdown:

**Mr. Beer:**

- Equipment Cost: $50
- Ingredient Kit Cost: $20
- Batch Size: 2 gallons

So $50 for equipment and then your per batch cost is $20, or $10/gallon, or $5.63/6-pack.
MoreBeer Kit:

* Equipment Cost: $110 + roughly $30 for a kettle.
* Ingredient Kit Cost: $30
* Batch Size: 5 gallons

With MoreBeer, it costs $140 for equipment and $30 for a kit. With a 5 gallon batch, your per batch cost is $6 per gallon or $3.37/6-pack.

Now these are rough estimates and costs vary, but the general idea is that Mr. Beer is cheaper upfront but the kits are more expensive in the long run. Also keep in mind that this is one of the cheaper Mr. Beer options and it is much cheaper up front than Coopers ($100) or The Beer Machine ($115).

I understand we’re in tough economic times and money is tight. If it’s really a stretch for you to afford any kit at all but you really want to make beer, then maybe Mr. Beer is right for you. Here are a few things to keep in mind though:

Ability to upgrade and flexibility – I talked about these up above, but if you brew one batch on Mr. Beer and decide you want a Chef’s kit, then your Mr. Beer equipment will be useless. You’re also limited in what you can brew to what Mr. Beer sells. With Chef’s kits, you work from raw ingredients so you can brew any beer style you want.

Quality – The comparison is not quite apples to apples because the Mr. Beer kit simply does not brew beer as good as what is possible with Chef’s kits.
The Fun Factor – How involved do you want to be with making your beer? Mr. Beer kits involve little more than mixing hot water and a can of syrup—will that satisfy you? If you want more involvement with what you’re doing, Chef’s kits are the way to go.

**Difficulty**

What if you’re simply not confident in your abilities to make beer with a Chef’s kit? You may be thinking of getting an Easy Bake Oven kit to keep it as simple as possible to first time, learn the process, and then when you’re more confident you’ll go for a Chef’s kit. That’s a totally legitimate strategy.

I’m not going to lie – brewing with a Chef’s kit is more difficult. There is more equipment, more time involved, and more steps in the process. You’ll need to pay close attention to what you’re doing and be thoroughly prepared and organized. There is a learning curve to these kits, and your first beer will not go as smoothly as your 3rd.

But they’re not *that* hard.

Honestly, a Chef’s kit is not too difficult for you. If you can make chili, then you can use one of these kits. After all, it is just a series of steps. It’s not like hitting a baseball where you need years of practice to develop the coordination and muscle memorization needed to solidly whack a fastball.

No, if you just follow the steps, use a good recipe with fresh ingredients, and have patience, then you will make great beer.
Still, I know making beer can be overwhelming at first. There are a lot of small steps and it’s easy to forget to add the hops or not sanitize your thermometer. But I’ve got a solution to help you out with the first brew so you don’t make any mistakes.

**Beer Kit Summary**

**Easy Bake Oven Kit**

- **Pros:**
  - Easiest way to get started
  - Cheapest Options
  - Dummy-proof

- **Cons:**
  - Lower quality beer
  - Not as fun to use
  - Lack of flexibility and upgradability

*Who’s it for?*
Someone who’s on a tight budget and just wants to make beer simply and easily, even if it’s not as good as it could be.

**Chef’s Kit**

- **Pros:**
  - Makes the highest quality beer
  - Fun and engaging process
  - Brew any type of beer you want

- **Cons:**
  - More expensive
  - Time consuming
  - More difficult to use

*Who’s it for?*
Those who want to make the best beer possible and enjoy learning the beer making process.
The Formula for Making Great Beer

There’s a concept I thought up regarding homebrewing called The 3-Legged Bar Stool. It’s a fairly accurate description of making great beer, in my opinion. The 3 legs are 1) Equipment, 2) Ingredients, and 3) Brewing knowledge. I’m sure you get the metaphor. Without one of the legs, the stool topples over and you make sub-par beer.

Keep in mind it’s not just the lack of one of these items, but a deficiency in any of them: the wrong equipment, old and stale ingredients, or insufficient knowledge.
Equipment and ingredients are obvious, but it’s brewing knowledge that is often neglected. You don’t just need equipment and ingredients; **you need to be shown how to use them.**

At the most basic level, brewing knowledge is the steps needed to make a batch of beer.

There are three problems with relying on kit instructions:

1. They are often vague and confusing. The first time you brew you’ll be scratching your head reading over the terms and procedures.

   When you brew for the first time using kit instructions, you’ll scratch your head the entire time. There will be words and processes that just don’t make any sense. After a few batches under your belt things will clear up, but what about those first few? Well, it’s a risk.

2. Another problem with kits (and books) is that they assume one size fits all. The fact of the matter is, everyone’s situation is different when homebrewing beer: Different equipment, different stoves, different kitchens, different timelines, and different resources.

   Imagine you are a student in a college biology class and you had a textbook, but not the same one the teacher and the rest of the class were using. The information is similar, but it would be tough to follow along.

   That’s the same problem with kit instructions and books. They don’t take into account your unique situation, so when a discrepancy arises; you’re
thrown a curveball. This is when panic mode sets in and you desperately go Googling for answers.

3. The final problem with kit instructions, and books for that matter, is that they are in text. **And text, I would argue, is not the best way to learn homebrewing.** Homebrewing is a very visual process and I strongly believe that video, *along with* other media formats like audio and text, is the best way to learn.

Studies on education show that a variety of media formats is the best way to learn. We absorb information better this way, and are more skilled when we need to recall that information and put it into action.

I’ve witnessed this firsthand on my blog, [BillyBrew.com](http://BillyBrew.com). I started doing the instructional homebrewing videos because I’m able to get my tips across better through video. When people started watching the videos I was amazed at the feedback. People were trying new techniques that they had previously written off because they looked too complicated in text.

Here’s a response to a video I posted on the homebrewing forum HomebrewTalk:

“After extensive reading on washing yeast I decided not to try it. After watching this video, it seems so simple. I guess it is only as confusing as a person makes it out to be. Thank you very much for the video, I will definitely give it a go next time.” - kmk1012
Walking through a step-by-step text outline on how to brew beer is confusing, period. But put those steps into a 10 minute video, and it looks incredibly simple.

You can’t blame the manufacturers too much. Their job is to make equipment, not teach you how to brew. That’s why some of them know even include basic homebrewing books with their kits. Unfortunately, those still suffer from the text dilemma stated above.

**Enter The Homebrew Academy**

I created The Homebrew Academy to walk you through brewing your first beer at home using a Chef’s kit.

It can be confusing and frustrating brewing your first beer. The different types of kits are on reason for the problem, and the varying (and often contradictory) information online is another. If you decide to go with a Chef’s kit, there a bunch of little steps that are easy to miss.

I want to remove the guesswork and help you get that first beer brewed, period. After that, the brewing process will make 100X more sense and you’ll be more confident in your abilities. But that first batch can be a real pain...

The Homebrew Academy is an online training program for brewing beer. We’ll start with your first beer using videos to walk you through it step-by-step.
Once you get that first beer under your belt, I will help you become a better brewer. With a better understanding of the brewing process, you can move on to brewing better beer, making more challenging beer styles, and even creating your own recipes for a beer that tastes exactly how you want it to.

We offer a test drive where if you’re not happy with your beer, you have a full 90 days to request a refund. In short, I guarantee your beer will turn out great.

Click here to get more information on signing up.

To your success,

Billy

HomebrewAcademy.com
BillyBrew.com