



Organize A Black Jar Honey Contest

Suzy Spencer

What is a “black jar” honey contest? In a normal, standard honey contest, the moisture percentage, fill-level of three jars, clarity, foam, particles, and other things are judged with a goal of perfection and consistency. The taste is not considered unless there is a defect present (like fermentation, residual chemicals, or metal contamination) in which case points are deducted from the score.

However, in a black jar contest, all that matters is how good the honey tastes to the judges. Many people like the simplicity of that. Honey containers are covered so the judges cannot see the visual characteristics or what’s in the honey (i.e., “black jar”). Sometimes the entrants are allowed to cover or decorate their jars in any way they wish, but this can result in judging bias. Sometimes the containers and lids are standardized then covered the same after submitted so the entries are completely indistinguishable from each other.

The North Carolina State Beekeepers Association (NCSBA) has two annual conferences – in spring (early March) and Summer. At the Summer conferences, we have the standard honey-related contests with specific criteria for judging. For a change of pace, we held our first black jar honey contest at the 2018 Spring conference with the intention of maximizing involvement of our attendees in a fun competition.

Other black jar contests for which I could find

information involved no more than three or four official judges, which meant the winner was chosen based on the taste preferences of only a few people. I wanted it to be a true “people’s choice” contest, allowing as many judges as possible to participate. The potential logistics were daunting because we could not predict how many entries we would get or how many people would want to judge.

The purpose of this article is to explain step-by-step and in detail how this can be done in an organized way at a big event involving a large number of entries and judges. To summarize, we had:

- a) 43 entries and 116 different judges, which was 20% of the total number of attendees at the conference (584). This procedure, which splits the entries into judging ranges, can easily accommodate fewer or more entries or judges. The number of judges is practically unlimited. However, around 75 entries is probably the maximum due to limits on how many entries a judge can reasonably taste during a given time period. Another draw-back is that not all judges can taste all the entries in the preliminary round when there are a lot of entries.
- b) two voting rounds (preliminary and final). There would not be a need for a preliminary round if you have fewer than 15 entries.
- c) poker chips to cast votes for 1st (blue, three points), 2nd

- (red, two points) and 3rd (white, one point) places, with the winner determined by total accumulated points.
- d) 2.5 days in which to structure the contest. It can be done in a shorter time-period with proper pre-planning and notification and good on-site communication with entrants and potential judges.
- e) clear rules and forms to make things flow easier and keep everything organized and documented. For your consideration and assistance in planning your own event, the rules and forms mentioned in this article are available to anyone as posted on the NCSBA website at <https://www.ncbeekeepers.org/members-only/contest-and-awards-mo/black-jar-honey-contest>. Having these in hand for reference as you read through the following steps may be helpful.

Here's how we did it.

1. **Develop the contest rules and make them widely-available before the event.** The notice and link to the rules was emailed to our 79 Chapters, announced in the NCSBA quarterly newsletter (the *NC Bee Buzz*), and posted on the NCSBA 2018 Spring conference webpage. The rules were subject to change to provide some wiggle room. For example, we did not say there could be only one entry per person until someone showed up with three. One thing you cannot change later is the container requirements for the entry, so be very clear about that. We required flip-top lids and plastic containers so the honey could be squeezed out during the judging rather than removing the lids. This also meant that only one tasting-spoon would be needed for each judge. Most black jar contests require a 1-lb entry, but our minimum was 12-oz. This was plenty for our format and the number of judges we had. Most "tastings" involve less than ¼ teaspoon of honey, although some judges will want to re-taste before casting their votes. The use of small tasting spoons will help with portion control.
2. **Reserve areas at the conference for signing in the entries and for judging.** The registration area is convenient for signing them in. For judging, you need enough tables to accommodate all entries spread out to give judges elbow-room and one for refreshments for palate-cleansing between tastings. How many entries do you anticipate? Be prepared for whatever happens.
3. **Decide how much time to devote to each of the two judging rounds** (preliminary and final) and how to break it up, for example, 9:30 am - 12:30 pm for the preliminary and 2-5 pm for the final if on the same day. Working fast, you will still need at least 1.5 hr between the rounds to count votes and prepare for the final round – believe me.
4. **Put details about the contest in the on-line and printed program.** Say where and when to drop off entries, the times and room where the judging will take, when the winners will be announced, and where to reclaim entries. If you will not know locations until the event, put "check at the registration desk" and later post it there. Good communication is required to make sure there are no misunderstandings and everyone stays happy. This event, after all, is supposed to be fun.
5. **Identify volunteers** who will help sign-in the entries, sign-in the judges, cover and mark the entries and

Get as many entries, and
judges as you can
(but be very organized).

extra voting-jars, count the votes, and help in other ways with the event. Have a backup plan.

6. **Assemble supplies** and do what you can before the event. Cover the voting jars, for example. Print the informational signs and sign-in sheets. Prepare the templates for the judges' handouts so all you have to do is fill in the official entry numbers and copy them on-site.
7. **Put up informational/direction signs at the event before registration opens.** Examples: "Sign in honey entries here", "Final contest rules", "Be a contest judge". Be sure to post the day, time, and room number for both rounds of judging and encourage people to come to both. We created text in word using 8.5 x 11" and 11 x 17" templates (sizes very inexpensive to print), with enough margins so the sheets could be cut down and spray-mounted onto standard size foam core (8x10" and 11x14"). The signs were propped on table display stands (available from big-box craft stores) and easels. This was very inexpensive to do.
8. **Sign in and receive the honey entries.** A clipboard helps keep sheets together. Include the entrant's name, signature, membership number (if you have these), county where honey was produced, the probable nectar source (optional), and space to add the official entry number (to be assigned later). We did not want to assign the official entry number to correspond with the order of when they dropped off their honey to avoid a possible bias, although this would be a simplified option. A volunteer must make sure the entry is labeled with the entrant's name (anywhere except on the lid) and is in an appropriate container (not too big or different from the others). Entrants were allowed to transfer their honey into another container if theirs were inappropriate; we provided containers and lids for purchase. We also had extra yellow, drip-less lids to switch out some that were variously colored or already leaking to further standardize the entries and make them more neat and anonymous. We absorbed that cost because it was not a stated-requirement in the rules.
9. **Place the entries in a wheeled container** to get them out of the receiving area after check-in, for safeguarding, and for easier transport. A wheeled cooler works great for this.
10. **Assign an official entry number to each entry.** We drew numbers from a hat. Write the official entry number on the sign-in sheet and guard this sheet: it is the key to the identities of the entries. Neatly label the lid of each honey with its official entry number using a permanent marker and white artist's tape or other easily-removed tape.
11. **Determine the number of judging "ranges" needed**

based on the final number of entries and assign each a letter. A judge should not be asked to taste more than 12-15 honeys. Less is better. We had 43 entries and ended up with four ranges (A through D) of 10-11 entries each. In order to have no more than 12-15 honeys in the final-round, you should have no more than four or five ranges in the preliminary-round, even if you have to exceed 12 honeys per range.

12. **Cover each of the entries with aluminum foil** so that only the number on the lid is showing and the flip-top can be opened. You can use other coverings, but foil is quick, easy, and inexpensive.
13. **Prepare a correspondingly-numbered, covered voting-jar for each numbered, covered entry.** To avoid bias, cover these so judges cannot see how many chips have been placed in the voting-jar by earlier judges. Prepare as many as possible prior to the event to save time at this step. Since you can't predict how many entries there will be, you have to guess. If you overestimate, all you've lost is a few sheets of covering material, but you'll be glad you had most of these done when you become busy with covering entries and finalizing the forms at the event. Pint-size canning jars and rings worked for us. Instead of metal lids, circles were cut from very stiff paper and a slit was cut into each circle (with an exacto-knife) big enough for a poker chip to fit through. We made a template of 12 per sheet and made copies at a copy center. We covered our voting-jars with black construction paper (9 x 12" cut to 6.5 x 12") so that only the ring/lid was visible. Use a white paint marker (like for marking queens) to add a big, neat number to the front of the voting jar that corresponds with the number on the entry.
14. **Complete the vote-tracking form (one sheet for each range)** by adding the official entry numbers in numerical order. You will use these same sheets for tallying the votes for both the preliminary and final rounds although only three from each range in the preliminary will make it into the final.
15. **Prepare the preliminary-round handout for the judges** (with instructions, list of entries in each range, and room to take notes as they taste). The instructions at the top can be prepared ahead of time, but you cannot finalize this form until you know the number of entries in each range. After you fill in the entry numbers in numerical order, you need access to a copier on-site to make copies. The judge keeps this sheet (it is not turned in), so make a copy for each judge.
16. **Set out the entries with their correspondingly-numbered voting-jars on the tables in the voting room** in order of official entry number (i.e., the order on the judges' handout). The judges are told they can taste in any order as long as they taste all in their assigned range before voting.
17. **Set out non-carbonated water, cups, and unflavored soda crackers for refreshing the palates of judges.** Have paper towels on-hand to clean up drips as needed.
18. **Open the preliminary-round voting and start signing in judges** at the designated time. We made announcements at each break in our conference program to encourage participation. Assign each

person a specific range to judge in rotating order as they arrive. The judges' sign-in sheet should include the name, membership number, and range assigned. Give each judge a handout/instructions with their assigned range circled, a tasting spoon, napkin, and one each of the following for casting their votes: blue poker chip (for 1st place), red chip (for 2nd place), and white chip (for 3rd place). We used the small silver plastic spoons that hold around ½ teaspoon, available in big-box grocery stores in the aisle where other plastic tableware is sold. Have extra pencils or pens available for taking notes. How many judges do you anticipate having? Be prepared so you'll have enough of each of these items. We ended up with 15 judges for each of the four ranges. This was actually 52 different people (not 60) because four returned to vote in additional ranges. These four had to sign in again and be assigned to a different range. We had three parents ask if their children could judge. We agreed but emphasized that it was to be taken seriously under the parents' supervision. In hindsight, we realized children just wanted to taste the honeys, not necessarily to vote, so they may be satisfied with just tasting. An alternative is to mark childrens' chips with tape or other method so you will be able to remove their chips from the official votes later or to identify a "childrens' choice" winner. It would also be interesting to see what honeys appeal to children more than to adults and identify why, but we did not do that.

19. **Close the preliminary-round judging at the designated time and tally the votes** to determine the top three entries in each range. Allow enough time to count each color of chip with at least two volunteers. Have a calculator available. Enter the numbers on the vote-tracking form and calculate the total points for each entry: blue chip = three points, red chip = two points, and white chip = one point. Have a plan to resolve any ties. Remove all chips from the voting-jars. Remove from the tables the entries (and their corresponding voting-jars) that do not make it into the final-round.
20. **Prepare the final-round handout for the judges and make copies.** This is similar to the preliminary round handout but will list only the top three winners from each range. These should be in order of the official entry number.
21. **Open the final-round voting and start signing in judges** at the designated time. Follow the same format as for the preliminary-round. We had 89 people judge the final-round. Of these, 25 had voted in the preliminary round and 64 were "new to the party".
22. **Close the final-round judging at the designated time and tally the votes** as before to determine the top three entries. Because not all judges in the preliminary round tasted all honeys, we could not say that these 12 final-round honeys were the top 12 entered into the contest. That is also why we could later rank only the top three honeys, not the 4th through 12th place finishers. A disproportionate number of the best-tasting entries could have been in one range due to the random entry-number assignments. Think about this and you will understand what I mean.
23. **Remove the covering from the entries to expose the entrants names so they can be reclaimed**

easily. Set them out on a table in the designated area for an honor-system pickup. It was obvious which ones did not make it out of the preliminary-round because of how much honey was left in the containers. Those that made it into the final-round had 7+ times as much gone. The amount remaining will depend on the number of judges in each round and how much they re-tasted before voting.

24. **Announce the winners in front of the conference attendees** when they are assembled as a group. We did that on the morning of the last day before attendees split up to attend the concurrent workshops. A blue, red, or white ribbon was presented to the top three entrants as they were called to the stage. The county where the honey was produced and the official entry number were also mentioned – this information seemed to be very important to the audience. Be prepared to mail the ribbons if the winners are not present.

25. **Publicize the results of the contest.** A recap of the contest, the winners, and their pictures were announced in the Summer issue of the NCSBA *Bee Buzz* newsletter. This may encourage people who did not attend the event to participate the next time.

That's how we organized and managed this highly-successful, entertaining event without knowing the number of entries and judges ahead of time. If you have additional questions, feel free to contact me at **ncsba.black.jar@gmail.com**. **BC**

Suzy Spencer is a NC Master Beekeeper and keeps a few hives at her home in downtown Raleigh, NC. She has a special interest in honey-tasting to detect specific aromas and flavors and has attended classes for this in California and Connecticut. She gives presentations to beekeeping clubs and other groups on the basics of honey-tasting.



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