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ime was, not too long ago, that beer drinking was thought to be solely the province of frat boys and blue-collar working stiffs in pickup trucks. Beer was bland, homogenous, inoffensive and cheap...and that was the good stuff. In the last twenty years, though, as North Americans have discovered the European passions for good food, good wine, and good strong coffee, beer has begun to enjoy—and deserve—a rebirth as well. Back in the dark ages, beer was beer; the only real choice was between regular or light. Now the choices are mystifying: Lager or Ale? Pilsner or Porter? Pete’s Wicked Red or Yuengling Black and Tan? Here at last to lend a guiding hand to generations of Bud Lite-addled palates is “Michael Jackson’s World Beer Hunter” from Discovery Channel Multimedia.

The Michael Jackson of the title is better known as the Beer Hunter, and has been called the godfather of the microbrewery renaissance in North America. His eponymous show on the Discovery Channel always provides a lively, informative visit to the world’s beer-making, and consuming, centers. With this kind of pedigree, the World Beer Hunter should be the definitive reference. Alas, it is not. Michael Jackson’s World Beer Hunter has only mixed results in meeting its two main goals: to introduce beer neophytes to the history, ingredients, styles, and brewing methods of the world’s beers, and to provide a catalog of some of the globe’s best beers, breweries, and pubs.

[A Fine Body, But Not Much Head On It](#)

The guide is certainly easy to look at, with a comfortable, intuitive interface and plenty of

eye catching maps and graphics. World Beer Hunter organizes its encyclopedic entries in several ways. First are the “tours”, which are the most accessible way to browse the wealth of information on the disk. They are broken down to such headings as the History Tour (which groups all of the entries related to the history of brewing), the Ingredients Tour (which includes all entries defining the components that go into various types of beer), or the Beer Tour (which comprises the catalog of noteworthy brews). For those who prefer to browse geographically, there is also a network of interactive maps cross-referenced to listings of beers, breweries, or styles. Finally, if you already know what you are looking for, there is an easy to use and comprehensive search function.

Because the program offers so many options for viewing its information, it is difficult for the rank amateur to find the best place to begin. For the first-time user, a main menu item called “The Basics” seems to fit the bill; it offers four QuickTime movies of Michael Jackson explaining the basics of tasting and enjoying beer. Unfortunately, the videos simply show Jackson sitting and talking next to a glass of beer, and provide very little specific, helpful information. This should have been the perfect place to include some actual clips from the television show—perhaps a video demonstration of beer brewing, or a visual tutorial on the styles and appearances of a number of different brews. Unfortunately, no such clips appear anywhere on the disk.

I found the better place to start was to browse through the tours. The tour topics are listed so haphazardly, though, that this is still not a very easy way to begin. Ideally, the list should have been sorted with the instructional tours (those defining principal ingredients or stages in the brewing process) at the top, and the catalog tours (those with an alphabetical listing of beers or breweries) last, so that an amateur could start at the top of the list and get the concepts down before moving on to the specifics.

he sequence of the tapes aside, however, the instructional segments are so poorly written and leave so many holes that it is best to skip them altogether and buy a good home brewing book instead. To their credit, Jackson and the folks at Discovery Multimedia have carefully cross referenced entries with hypertext links to other terms or definitions. Unfortunately, there are so many terms they DON'T define that the definitions raise more questions than they answer.

[A Coffee-Table Book For the Desktop](#)

Although it is a failure as an introductory guide, the World Beer Hunter is a reasonably good reference disk. It catalogs over three hundred different brews from Abita Amber to Zoser Stout, over four hundred breweries, and even includes a twenty-one stop pub crawl of Jackson's favorite global watering-holes (most of which appear to be in Seattle and Dublin).

The beer listings are as comprehensive as they come, and all are hypertext-linked to listings for style, brewery, and key ingredients. They describe the beer's taste and appearance, any international awards won, and provide such all-important information as the specific gravity of the brew—before AND after fermentation! Many also have audio snippets from Jackson which range from insightful to inscrutable but, either way, add a bit of multimedia charm to the otherwise text-heavy guide.

If you do not want to simply look up a specific beer or brewery, the maps are a good way to browse the globe and see what various regions have to offer. Although there seem to be a few regional prejudices (Jackson all but dismisses South America but devotes no less than six maps to Belgium), they offer a good overview of beers and bars of note on six continents. The maps also contain icons leading to further pithy audio anecdotes of Jackson's beer-hunting adventures in each region.

Michael Jackson has also compiled several helpful lists. In addition to the predictable "Twenty beers I would want to have with me on a desert island" we get the more esoteric "Beers perfect for an Autumn day" or the downright shocking "Beers that go well with dessert". Each of the lists can be called up independently, and are hypertext linked to the brews they feature.

The most informative part of World Beer Hunter is, paradoxically, one you do not necessarily need the program to enjoy. Although a main menu item can hook you directly into Beer Hunter World Wide Web site, I will save you the time and money; it is found at <http://www.beerhunter.com>. This site, unlike the CD-ROM is well-written and chock full of beer-related event schedules and news. Best of all are the in-depth featured brewery and newly-tasted selections, which appear to change on a regular basis. Now if only they could find a way to distribute samples online...

[The Bottom Line](#)

Michael Jackson's World Beer Hunter is a baby step towards the enlightened day that beer is treated to the reverence and fawning attention that wine currently enjoys. It is an imperfect step, however, succeeding more as a reference guide for those who already know what they like than as an introduction for the amateur. Discovery Channel Multimedia has tried to capture the spirit of Michael Jackson's dynamic television show, but, without any illustrative video clips, coherent writing, or useful background information, all we get is an allegedly multimedia resource which could just as well appear on the printed page. Until a better CD-ROM comes along, anyone who wants to "search the world for the perfect beer" should instead use the purchase price of this disk to get cable, and watch The Beer Hunter each week on TV.

Pros

- Detailed reference with plenty of beers, breweries and pubs worldwide
- Well-designed interface and search function, useful and informative lists

Cons

- Badly-written and unclear instructional entries
- Useless video clips
- A few glaring omissions in the beer and pub lists

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