

CLEANING KEGS & TAP LINES

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Even the best beer in the world is going to taste like stale, wet peanuts if served through unclean tap lines. Draft beer is beautiful, but like many beautiful things, it takes work to keep it that way. Proper cleaning of kegs and tap lines is vital to keeping draft beer tasting the way it should.

THE BUILDUP

There are at least two deposits that can build up on draft beer equipment over time. The first is probably the most obvious, and that is dried beer. If a tap line and faucet are in regular use, beer should be flowing frequently through it, but in some places it can dry and build up. Bacteria can grow in this residue, and if it is left long enough, it can negatively affect the taste of the beer. The second source of buildup is calcium oxalate, commonly known as beer stone. If not properly cleaned, it can also provide an unsanitary place for microorganisms to live. Beer stone can be white, brown, or gray and appear like a scaly mineral buildup.



Right: Filling a clean, sanitized keg with beer.
Below: Don't fear the foam when you're using Star San.



FREQUENCY

A commercial bar might require more frequent cleaning than a home kegerator. The Brewers Association recommends in their *Draught Beer Quality Manual* (free Internet pdf download) that draft lines be cleaned every 14 days. For a home kegerator, a more realistic view is "between every keg." Your palate should tell you if it should be cleaned more frequently. I have had 4 beers on tap for over 7 years and cleaned the draft lines after every empty keg. This has been sufficient to keep my tap lines clean and problem-free. More frequent cleaning would be fine, but is probably unnecessary.

Kegs should be thoroughly cleaned and sanitized before every use. Faucets can be cleaned in place while running water and cleaning products through them, but you might want to take them apart and perform a thorough cleaning now and then. Again, if you begin tasting off flavors you believe to be caused by dirty kegs, lines or faucets, you will need to thoroughly clean them all.

GET CLEAN

There is not one single, correct way to clean these components. But there are tools that will help you do a good job. You may need wrenches, scrub brushes, screwdrivers, and a jar of elbow grease.

You will also need some cleaning chemicals. Keg-cleaning kits are available for purchase, and they might be the easiest way to get both tools and chemicals for cleaning your kegerator. These kits also come with a hand air pump to push the cleaner through the tap lines, but you can also use gravity, which is free and, so far, reliable.

As for chemicals, there are many choices. Kits might come with some version of Beer Line Cleaner (BLC). That is good for maintenance cleaning, but for tougher jobs like significant beer stone buildup, more serious chemicals might be needed. Caustic-based products are commonly used (Power Punch 22 is one I've seen for home use), and they are often followed by a rinse of a phosphoric acid-based product to neutralize the caustic and remove any remaining beer stone. Star San, a popular sanitizer, is a blend with phosphoric acid, and it's said to help remove beer stone. There are also non-caustic alkaline cleaners such as PBW (Powder Brewery Wash). These are a few options, but there are others that might also work (for example, citric acid, white vinegar, bleach for tap lines but not on stainless, etc.). You might have to research which approach is best for your particular cleaning need.

Cleaning the tap lines can be done in different ways, and you will become comfortable with whichever way works for you. After a keg runs dry, the lines can be flushed with hot water. Then you might do a chemical wash with an option listed above such as Beer Line Cleaner. After that, rinse with hot water, and before the next beer is tapped, the line should be sanitized.

Cleaning kegs is pretty easy. If you have one from a liquor store, you don't have to do anything but return it. Most people who own kegs have the 5-gallon Cornelius kegs, formerly used for soda pop. The posts come off and the poppets can be taken out. The two dip tubes (one gas, one beverage) should also be taken out. They can be rinsed with hot water and if need be, chemically cleaned. You can buy a small brush with a long handle that can be used to clean the inside of the beverage dip tube. The keg itself also needs to be rinsed out and scrubbed with a plastic bristle brush. If it is clean after that, you are all set. However, if it has some build up or stubborn spots, more cleaning might be needed, perhaps with some chemicals and more scrubbing. As with the tap lines, the keg should be sanitized before filling it with beer.



Here are some Cornelius keg posts taken apart.



A few cleaning brushes to clean kegs and dip tubes.



You might be able to gravity feed hot water and cleaning chemicals through tap lines.

Who knew personal hygiene applied to beer?



Dirty beer isn't a good dirty.

FINAL POUR

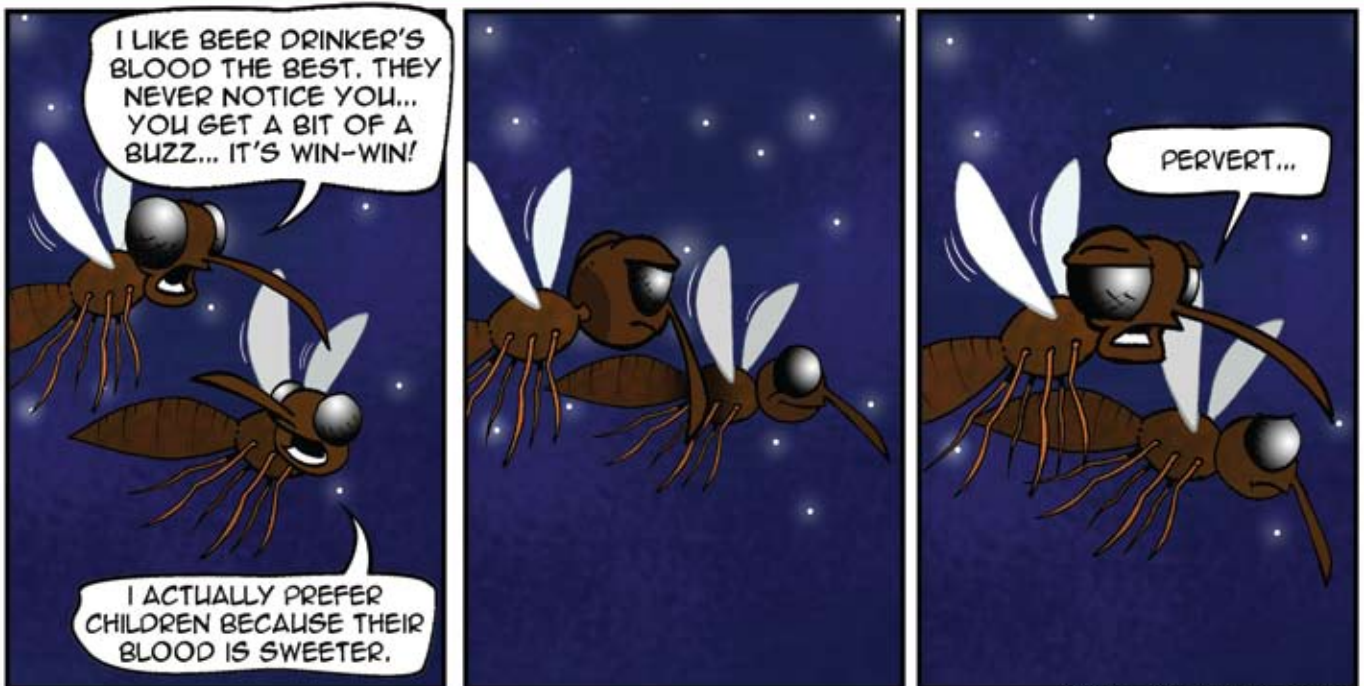
Remember, prevention is the best treatment. Stubborn buildup should not be a problem if you clean your components regularly. Pay attention to how the beer tastes. Has it changed since you first tapped it? Is it just the beer's natural change (i.e., less hop freshness, smoother alcohol bite, etc.), or is there an off-flavor that does not taste right? If there is, let that be your alarm to do a thorough cleaning. There is nothing worse than bad-tasting beer. Likewise, there are few things more enjoyable than a daily glass of clean-tasting draft beer. Go get you some, and stay beautiful. ☺

Four delicious draft beers.

FREE ONLINE RESOURCE:
Draught Beer Quality Manual
from the Brewer's Association

THE BREWERY

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