

Geoffrey's Introduction to Kegging

If you have fallen in love with brewing beer, you may have found that bottling is perhaps the least fun of the entire endeavor. That's a lot of bottles and caps needing to be scrupulously clean, and sanitized. Well, there is a great solution, your 5 gal. batch will fit perfectly in a Cornelius Keg, which you may know as a "soda keg". It requires only one easily cleaned vessel for the whole batch, and opens a world of new serving options.

Your beer will now be "on draft" for a start. You can easily force carbonate your beer, the byproduct of which is very portable beer, because no sediment is produced during carbonation, you never have to worry about disturbing yeast like on the bottom of bottles. Or, if you prefer, prime as you have always done. This brings you a lot closer to the serving style of "Real Ale", which is cask conditioned.

You have 2 choices for kegs: one uses a twist-lock bayonet for hose fittings used by CocaCola, and the more popular "ball lock", used by Pepsi. Either style works fine, but you may find it easier to get fittings for one over the other, and usually the ball lock is the one style that homebrew suppliers stock. These fittings along with kegs and other supplies are commonly available from vendors who service the soft drink industry. Look in the Yellow Pages under "Beverage Dispensing Equip." A shiny new keg that doesn't have the name of a soft drink manufacturer stamped on it can cost \$95 (US), but there are several vendors of used and reconditioned kegs. Take a look on the web, I've included a couple of worthwhile URLs.

For dispensing, you can simply use cheap plastic picnic tap that fits on the end of a hose, or you can go for real beer taps. A real valuable resource will be beer distributors, they will sell you anything you will ever need in the way of taps and related fittings. Many homebrew mailorder vendors now stock keg, taps & fittings. The exciting aspect of these sources is that they will usually be very enthusiastic about your efforts. My local Budweiser distributor has this big jovial guy in the "Draft Services" department that looks like he came directly from a German beer garden. They have neat fittings that allow you to fit a beer tap through any wall thickness, which allows mounting a tap through the wall of a picnic cooler, for a portable cooling, dispensing setup.

In addition the keg and tap, you'll need a CO2 system. This is usually the most expensive part. It consists of a bottle of CO2, measured in lbs. and a regulator. Five lbs. is a good size for dispensing beer because we don't usually use much gas. You can find 20, 30 lb. and larger tanks, it matters only how much weight you feel like carrying. Carbon dioxide remains in a liquid state when compressed at about 1500 lbs. pressure, with head space for the gas to expand. The regulator takes the pressure down to the 5 to 15 lbs. we use for dispensing, but should be capable of 25 to 40 lbs. for carbonating. It can cost around \$135 (US) for a tank and regulator, but a 5 lb. tank will last quite a while (it should be able to dispense 9 tanks of beer on one filling) and cost only a few dollars to refill. Because of the liquid expanding to gas phenomenon, your 2 stage regulator will always read 1500 lbs. on the high pressure side until you run out of gas. Over the years I have collected a couple of small cylinders, so I work with one, and fill the spare at my leisure. A note about gas cylinders, they all have to be tested for their ability to handle high pressure. This is a good thing. The year of testing is stamped on the cylinder, and goes for (I think) 10 years. Be sure to check any used cylinder for current date, or you won't be able to get it filled. Most tanks will continue to pass this test for many years, it just adds 25 to 40 bucks to your cost. Welding gas suppliers can usually provide this service if needed, and of course try the beverage dispensing guys as well.

Cornelius kegs have a few replaceable gaskets. If you buy new kegs, you may never have to worry about them. If you buy reconditioned, that IS what gets renewed, so look for cracked "O" rings at the locks, they are the most obvious wear points. There are also small gaskets on the pickup and gas-in tubes, the popit valves, and a large ring on the lid. The cool thing about this system, is that it all comes apart for easy cleaning, and all the parts are replaceable. I simply take everything apart and give it a normal cleaning/sanitizing with Idophore, rinse, and reassemble. A funny aspect of stainless steel is that it remarkably porous, and will pickup smells. A keg that formerly held root beer will retain that aroma and transfer it to beer for a batch or two.

Resources:

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| John Lifer, author, keg merchant | http://www2.misnet.com/~jliferjr/Kegs/whatsnew.htm |
| William's Brewing, mail order | http://www.williamsbrewing.com |
| Society of Brewers | http://www.beertown.org |
| The Brewery, Total Brewing Information | http://brewery.org |