

Review: PicoBrew tidies some home-brew hassles for a price

December 2 2015, by Ryan Nakashima



This photo provided by BLASTmedia shows The Zymatic by PicoBrew. The Zymatic is a home brewing system that simplifies brewing by circulating water through grains and hops at just the right temperature and time. (BLASTmedia via AP)

I've been brewing beer in my kitchen and garage for a couple years, so I know how time-consuming and messy it gets. I had high hopes for a system that promises to eradicate those hassles.

PicoBrew offers that system in two parts, sold separately. The Zymatic aims to simplify brewing by circulating [water](#) through grains and hops at just the right temperature and time. KegSmarts is a refrigerator and dispenser meant to take you the rest of the way from grain to glass.

But the system doesn't automate everything. You'll still be hooking and unhooking hoses, lifting 20 pounds or more of liquids and sticking your arm down a keg to wash it with a sponge. This is no coffee maker or bread-making machine, both of which give you the end product in the same machine you put in the ingredients with minimal fuss.

The improvements PicoBrew does offer, such as precision during the boil, will set you back roughly ten times what a bare-bones homebrew setup might.

The Zymatic and KegSmarts combo is a case study in automation that simultaneously goes too far and yet not far enough. At roughly \$3,000 combined, PicoBrew's system is too expensive for bargain-minded home brewers, yet not automated enough for folks who want to brag about making their own beer but don't like to get their hands dirty.

To be sure, PicoBrew offers some improvements:

— The Zymatic hits the ideal temperatures and changes them as necessary. You can just flip a switch and walk away during the initial stages, when sugars get extracted out of roasted, cracked grains to produce wort. And because the Zymatic cycles wort through the grain constantly, you don't have to rinse it with hot water to extract the last bit of sugar.

— The Zymatic boils the wort and cycles it through the hops at the right time, saving you time and effort.

— The Zymatic puts the finished wort into a keg, where, after cooling, you can add yeast with a special lid to let it ferment. This avoids spills.

— The KegSmarts tells you how much beer is left in each keg using a scale PicoBrew sells separately for \$129. Inside the KegSmarts, you can serve one batch cold while fermenting another batch at a warmer temperature. This requires an electric-blanket-style keg cozy, which costs another \$129.

The things PicoBrew doesn't do are significant:

— It doesn't chill the wort. You need to do this, or you'll kill the yeast. Zymatic's chill option requires you to prepare a giant container full of ice to put the keg in. It's easier just to let it sit overnight or use my method—dunk the container into a sink of cold water, add ice cubes and slowly run tap water around it.

— It doesn't filter out the yeast before kegging or bottling. Because it is cycling water, you'd think the Zymatic would be able to send finished beer through a filter into another keg. Instead, you need gravity—thus the lifting—along with tubing and a siphoning tool known as a racking cane.

— Cleanup. Although the Zymatic has a clean and rinse function for parts you can't access, you still have to dump the spent grains and used hops out and wash the filters. I typically need a garden hose and a sponge for this.

The system also gives you access to an online recipe database and tools for monitoring the progress of your brew. But you need Wi-Fi—something that's weak in my garage, where I need to keep the devices because they are so big. Not having an offline option can be frustrating.



This photo provided by BLASTmedia shows The KegSmarts, a home beer brewing system by PicoBrew. KegSmarts is a refrigerator and dispenser meant to take you the rest of the way from grain to glass. It tells you how much beer is left in each keg using a scale, sold separately. (BLASTmedia via AP)

Did PicoBrew beer taste better than mine? Not really. Many variables fall outside the system—being sanitary, measuring water carefully, carbonating right, and siphoning beer off of bitter yeast with care. To me, doing those things well contributes more to good taste than the

things PicoBrew takes care of.

And I lose some of the pride of saying, "I did this on my own."

But being able to walk away during the initial boil was key to brewing with little kids. As a new parent, standing around for a few hours sloshing around hot liquid isn't a luxury I have these days.

And hey, innovation is cool. I don't bet against a company with good marketing and good customer service when things go wrong, as it did a few times during testing.

PicoBrew has another gizmo coming in March. The new Pico brews a batch half as small as the Zymatic and is selling on Kickstarter for \$499 right now. The group-funding project has raised an impressive \$1.4 million. However, unlike the Zymatic, you must buy sealed packages of ingredients from PicoBrew or its craft-brewery partners. And it rewards weeks of waiting with less beer.

Innovation is a costly, messy process, just like home brewing. The PicoBrew folks have a ways to go to make this as easy as making coffee, but I'll raise a glass to them on their journey.

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Citation: Review: PicoBrew tidies some home-brew hassles for a price (2015, December 2) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-12-picobrew-tidies-home-brew-hassles-price.html>

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