

Kicking the Craft Brewer Can

BY MICHAEL KUDERKA

Back in 2002, when Oskar Blues Brewing began offering their Dale's Pale Ale in cans, it was a unique marketing differentiator that few craft brewers thought they would replicate. How times have changed now, 11 years later, even The Boston Beer Company has joined in with Dale Katchis in promoting canned beer with the introduction of the "Sam Can".

While for the craft beer producers "the can" offers a better vessel for protecting the beer experience, and allows craft brewers to more easily compete with big beer for availability on airplanes and for increased shelf space, for retailers the canned craft beer craze has its challenges.

Cans vs. Bottles

"We have considerably more bottles than cans, so there really is no comparing the two. Though, it seems that the can trend is gaining steam, and it is here for good. Basically with our consumers, if it is new, it goes," summarized Pete Vaselopulos, Store Manager for Foremost Liquors in Chicago.

"I can tell you that where brewers like Ska, and Two Brothers have their products available in both cans and bottles, the cans sell much better," Pete explains. "Plus, newer local breweries here in Chicago, like Revolution & Half Acre, are only offering their bands in cans of six packs and four packs. So, in that case the can is the only way to go".

What about taste?

"Cans certainly have a place in the market, and these are not the cans we drank from in the 60s. Flavors are full, not metallic tasting. I've done some side by side taste tests of various bands and could

not tell the difference between canned and bottled contents" said Bert Bingel, Owner of Bert's Better Beer Hooksett, New Hampshire. Which was the focus of the "Sam Can" as an example, The Boston Beer Company spent many years working with any number of experts, including sensory expert, Roy Desrochers of GEI Consultants.

Desrochers, a recognized beer flavor expert for the Master Brewer's Association of the Americas (MBAA), helped Jim Koch study every aspect of the new can, from how it could potentially impact the flavor of Samuel Adams' flagship Boston Lager, to the ergonomics of how the beer flows from the can and hits the taste receptors on a drinker's tongue.

"I worked with Jim and the other brewers at Sam Adams on an ergonomic and flavor study to understand the benefits of the new can," says Desrochers. "The flared lip and wider top of the new Sam Can work in concert to deliver the beer in a way that makes the flavor closer to drinking out of a glass".

Who is the "can consumer" ?

The portability of cans does have its advantages, allowing craft beer drinkers to bring beer where bottles are usually not allowed or convenient, such as beaches, parks, pools, sporting events, camp sites, boats and airplanes.

"Some customers buy everything in cans, these are usually outdoors types," said Bert Bingel. "They see the can as easier and lighter to pack out from a camp site. Additionally, our store isn't far from the NASCAR track and glass is not allowed inside the gates" Bert explained.

Is there a different approach to selling cans ?

"Most of our cans are in a separate display area as many customers (hikers, campers, boaters, et al) want an overview of the can selection," Bert continued.

"Personally, I prefer bottles over cans, but our consumer seems to have more of a desire to purchase craft in cans in the summer, although I am starting to see more craft brands being offered in fall and winter seasons as well," described Joe Mignoli, President of Hoboken Beer & Soda Outlet. "We have one section in my craft beer department dedicated just to cans, mostly in 12pk, which is easy for the consumer to pick up and go".

Bottom line

It is up to the consumers. As long as brewers are canning brands that sell well, retailers will need to make room for canned craft beer.

Thinking Out-of-the-Box?

How innovative is your store at selling beer? We would like to know. If you have promotions that go beyond refilling the cold box, we would like to hear from you and share your "out-of-the-box" thinking with our fellow Style Trends readers.

E-mail me at mkuderka@mcbasset.com with your successful ideas for selling beer, along with your contact information. If we write about your program in our column we will send you a free copy of The 3rd Edition of *The Essential Reference of Domestic Brewers and Their Bottled Brands*.

Michael Kuderka is the Managing Partner at MC Basset, LLC. The company designs beer selling solutions and training for On and Off Premise retailers.

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