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Sierra Nevada Brewing
Co.'s Hazy Little Thing.
PHOTO BY MIYAGI POCOCC

Still hazy?

**A look at where
craft beer is
heading in 2019**



Craft beer culture is constantly evolving and developing, and I, like many writers, like to take the new year as an opportunity to recalibrate, examine what has recently happened and speculate on what may come. So, as 2019 begins, what's brewing?

IPAs, of course, continue to dominate the industry, and we have seen a few sub-styles emerge. Last year, the brut IPA was the big story. It appeared first in San Francisco as Social Kitchen and Brewery's Kim Sturdavant innovated a technique of fermenting beer to full dryness. In most beers, about 25 percent of sugar remains unfermented, creating beer's signature sweetness. But Sturdavant utilized a particular enzyme (amyloglucosidase) that breaks down stubborn sugars and makes 100 percent of the malt accessible to the yeast, which converts carbohydrates into ethanol. The result is an essentially sugarless IPA that many brewers around the country have since emulated and which many have referred to as the "champagne of beer" (apologies to Miller High Life).

What else is happening? Hazy IPAs have gone from a hot new trend back in 2016 to a staple style.

The beers, such as Sierra Nevada's popular Hazy Little Thing (No. 1 on VinePair's 50 Best Beers list for 2018), are brewed with an unconventional means of adding hops, with most of the fragrant bittering blossoms added to the beer late in the brew cycle. For a variety of reasons, this results in a beer with more fruity aromas, less bitterness and a thick haze suspended in the unfiltered liquid. According to some reports, hazy IPAs—because they are often less bitter than conventional ones—have lured beer drinkers previously leery of overly bitter IPAs into the category as newfound IPA fans.

Last year, California Craft Brewers Association Executive Director Tom McCormick provided me with an industry forecast for 2018. He predicted, among other things, that IPAs would continue to grow as a style (did he have a crystal ball?!), and that there would be more mergers between smaller and larger breweries.

"That might have been the one prediction where I was off," he says now. While numerous craft breweries have been purchased in recent years by larger companies, 2018 saw less of this activity.

"There were a lot of breweries for sale, but the buyers were largely on the sidelines," he says.

The uptick in breweries for sale

is a result of intense competition, he says, and the fact that "a lot of brewers have found it challenging to find that easy money pot they were hoping for" and are trying to make an exit from the business.

McCormick says consumers are losing some interest in double and triple IPAs compared to several years ago, when supersize bitter beers seemed all the rage. They are still popular, "but sales have flattened" for strong beers in general, McCormick says.

He also believes 2019 will see a continued preference for session beers—that is, lower-alcohol beers that still provide concentrated and appealing flavors.

McCormick's most interesting prediction is that the industry will put out more nonalcoholic products. Brewers, he says, are developing methods of making beers with negligible alcohol levels but lots of flavor, and he says that many consumers seem to want that.

"I'm going out on a limb here, but my general sense is that the next generation [of legal drinking age] is a group of very health-conscious consumers, and part of that is drinking less alcohol," he says.

A year from now, we'll check in and see how the forecasts have played out. □