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CHOW



For the beer enthusiast, balance is key

Breaking news: Beer is not healthy. It's an unfortunate reality that recently caught up with Massachusetts beer writer Norman Miller, who for years wrote a beer column called "The Beer Nut" for the Metro West Daily News.

But in November, he called it quits. In his final column—a remarkable ode to humility and self-reckoning—he confessed, "My lifestyle is killing me. I'm middle-aged and obese. I need to make changes so I can see 45, let alone 50 or beyond."

He said he often drank five or six beers four nights a week, and, describing health problems and emergency room visits, he said, "I can't live this way."

He reminds us that the line between enthusiast and alcoholic can grow blurry and that, as with many things, there are consequences to overdoing it.

Drinking large volumes of alcohol can hurt the liver. But the most immediate health impact of beer is its propensity for causing weight gain. Most craft beers are fat-makers, carrying at least 150

calories in a 12-ounce bottle or can. Some—like imperial stouts and other strong beers—may contain 300 calories or more. Have a 22-ouncer of one of these giants and you could be imbibing 600 calories. These numbers add up, and it's little wonder that the "beer belly" is the loathed consequence of a few too many pints.

Some breweries are considering this as they draw up recipes. In Delaware, Dogfish Head has introduced a new low-calorie IPA. Named Slightly Mighty, the beer—to be released again in April—contains 4 percent alcohol-by-volume and, per 12-ounce serving, just 95 calories, according to the brewery's website. The beer is made using a technique that allows all the sugar in the beer to be converted into alcohol. In most beers, about a quarter of the grain malt goes unfermented. So, in the Dogfish Head beer, less sugary malt is needed to achieve the desired alcohol level—meaning less total caloric energy in the beer.

While the beer is being hyped by some media as a groundbreaking step, it really isn't much, if any, different from the brut IPAs that emerged out of San Francisco last

year and have gained such fandom. These beers are dry, with little to no residual sugar and, as a result, fewer calories than conventionally made beers of the same alcoholic content.

For this writer, I look at beer as a supplement to a lifestyle, not its focus—and as such, I believe it can be healthy. I drink plenty of beer, but I also enjoy riding a bicycle uphill as fast as I possibly can. When—and if—I break my personal best times on the Sausalito-Golden Gate Bridge climb or McCullough Road in the Headlands, you can bet I'll have a beer afterward.

As for those low-calorie beers, like the Slightly Mighty, kudos to the effort, but I don't really see the point. If we believe that less beer is more, then none must be best—and that leaves us with either an empty glass or a guilty conscience as we timidly sip a pint. Neither outcome is much fun for a beer lover.

I think there can be a comfortable balance involving physical exercise, restraint and any beer on the menu—even a strong one. Under these circumstances, beer is healthy. □