

Raise a glass to healthier drinking



PHOTO BY MICHAEL MCSHERRY

Sierra Nevada's acquisition of fitness-focused brewery highlights new trend in beer

When a small beer brand inspired by trail-running and cycling in the Marin Headlands was bought in February by Sierra Nevada Brewing Co., it underscored a market-wide trend: Brewers big and small are trying to reach a broader audience, or hang onto their existing one, by making beer healthier.

by
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For Sufferfest Brewing Co., launched in 2015 by brewer and athlete Caitlin Landesberg, success came with a unique perspective on beer. Landesberg was not interested in good beer at any cost. She was interested in a deeper relationship between good beer and personal wellness. This manifested in beers with gluten removed, relatively low alcohol levels, and names that celebrate endurance running and cycling, with sly references to the GPS tracking app Strava, used by many athletes. Sierra Nevada, the third-largest craft brewery in the United States, saw a promising market and partnered with the young brewery.

It's also part of a trend toward healthier beer, or, at least, beer perceived as being healthier. Low-alcohol beers, beers hybridized with kombucha, beers with reduced gluten and beers without any alcohol are gaining popularity.

Athletic Brewing Co., in Stratford, Conn., is pursuing a similar marketing tactic as Sufferfest, but more directly. The brewery, aiming to make healthier beer, offers a line of completely alcohol-free beers. Such products were once widely derided as "near-beer," but the craft brewing industry is beginning to take them seriously.

At Iron Springs Pub and Brewery in Fairfax, and its taproom in San Rafael, the tap line always includes a nonalcoholic beer, according to the brewery's founder, Mike Altman.

"We sell a fair amount at both locations," he said.

He says brewers are increasingly focused on "figuring out how to produce a really good nonalcoholic IPA"—something he said his brewing team hasn't yet mastered.

In December, I spoke with Tom McCormick, the

executive director of the California Craft Brewers Association, about beer trends to watch for in 2019. He told me he was seeing an interest in beer with less, or even almost no, alcohol.

"The newest generation of LDA"—that's industry talk for legal drinking age—"are more health-conscious and drinking less," he said.

He said he expected to see more beers with less or no alcohol this year, and that seems to be happening. According to a November article in *The Drinks Business*, in the three months leading to Aug. 12, 2018, sales of nonalcoholic beer were up 58 percent from the same period a year prior.

According to a Nov. 19 article in *Brewbound*, brewers are applying various technical maneuvers to remove the alcohol from beer "[i]n an effort to attract a growing number of drinkers who are moderating alcohol consumption."

If alcohol is going just slightly out of fashion, what does this say about the beer industry as a whole? Well, beer sales overall are steadily declining, according to numerous market analyses. Sales and production of beer in the United States, in fact, have dipped for five years in a row, with the greatest losses occurring in the category of mainstream lagers. Craft beer sales are on the rise—but, even in this market, customers are veering toward lighter, lower-alcohol beers, such as pilsners, kölsches, session IPAs and brut IPAs (that last one generally contains standard alcohol levels but has no residual sugar and therefore fewer calories).

Often, just as society at large embraces a new trend, a conscious and aware person may observe that he or she is riding the same wave. Now, as talk of low-alcohol beers grows louder in the brewing community, I find myself increasingly attracted to beers at the other end of the spectrum, where less may be more. □



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