



Tastes great
and less filling?

Young craft-beer drinkers seeking less calories, lower alcohol

I remember just a few years ago when people used to search the tap list for higher-alcohol beers,” said Michael LaLonde, president of Deschutes Brewery. “Now we’re seeing the exact opposite—people are looking for the lowest-alcohol beers.”

by
Alastair
Bland

This trend is a radical change, one that LaLonde believes craft brewers have not traditionally been equipped to handle. For years, he explained, craft beer differentiated itself from mainstream lager brands by offering more flavor and more alcohol.

Now, the Bend, Ore., brewery is among many experimenting with ways to continue creating that flavor but without the alcohol that would usually go hand in hand with it. Deschutes has brewed an IPA called Teensy Weensy that, in various pilot renditions, has ranged from as high as 3.7 percent alcohol-by-volume to as low as 2 percent. He says this is a fundamentally challenging kind of beer to make, since “flaws can easily show themselves in a low-ABV beer.” Hoppy bitterness can also overwhelm the flavor profile in beers with very low levels of alcohol.

Brewer Christian Kazakoff, formerly of Iron Springs Pub & Brewery in Fairfax and now helping launch Canyon Club Brewery, the soon-to-open brewery in Moraga, says he doesn’t think these beers are necessarily especially hard to make.

“Any talented brewer can make a great tasting beer and have low ABV,” said Kazakoff, who considers low-ABV beers to be in the same vein of interest as low-calorie beers.

Where Kazakoff sees the potential difficulty is in

selling the beers, even to people who want them.

“People will think that just because it’s a low-ABV and -calorie beer it should cost less—much less,” he said.

At State Room Brewery in San Rafael, brewer Larry Berlin has seen the interest from consumers in drinking lighter beers. (The lowest beer he has on tap is a 4.2 percent ABV rice lager.) He believes the explanation is straightforward:

“Consuming less alcohol is more healthy,” he says.

LaLonde also cited popular health trends as the force behind the growing popularity of super-low-ABV beers. He named low-carbohydrate diets, simple caloric intake reduction and the paleo craze, in which followers eat only foods that could hypothetically be found while hunting and gathering (they’ll drink mead and wine but not beer, since it is made from grains).

Some people seek out lighter beers simply so they can drink more of them. We see this interest manifest in beers with name like Daytime Ale (Lagunitas Brewing Co.) and All Day IPA (Founders Brewing Co.).

If alcoholism is one’s problem, that person should quit drinking. For those concerned about drinking more beer than is healthy, then low-ABV beers may be the remedy. Like the brewpub patrons LaLonde describes who once came in looking for strong beers and now want light ones, my own interest has similarly flipped. I remember the tingle of excitement I once felt when I would find a beer listed at more than 12 or 13 percent ABV. Now, I hunt the aisles and bars for beers less than 4 percent, and I am waiting, hopefully, for something as tiny as the Deschutes Teensy Weensy. □



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