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## CHOW



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# Cans torpedo bombers

**Craft beer shifts from big to small packaging**

**F**or years, I preferred not to buy six-packs. Six beers together have always seemed too much of one thing for my taste. Being a person who likes variety, I have generally favored the most widely available alternative: the 22-ounce bottle known as the “bomber.” To me, it seemed buying two or three bombers was a better way to sample several beers than buying as many six-packs.

by  
**Alastair Bland**

Bombers have been a signature packaging style for craft beer for decades, often used for higher-alcohol specialty beers or annual special releases, but also for everyday, all-year brands. While six-packs were an economical way to buy beer in bulk, the bomber was often a mark of class.

But bombers are being pushed off shelves. They’ve lost popularity in the past half-decade, almost to the point of being obsolete. Breweries still use them, and people still buy them, but 22-ounce bottles are widely seen as old-school, old-hat, traditional and a bit too representative of breweries that came of age in the 1990s and 2000s. Few new breweries use bombers anymore, and long-established craft breweries—Lagunitas Brewing Co., Firestone Walker Brewing Co. and many more—are downsizing their big-bottle beers to 16-ounce cans and 12-ounce bottles, sometimes sold as singles.

“People like buying a little bit less these days, and a 22-ounce bottle is a big commitment,” said Mike Altman, owner of Iron Springs Pub & Brewery in San Rafael. “We invested heavily in 22-ounce bottles and labels.”

Now they’re changing tactics to meet demands of the new and evolving market. Altman and his team have all but retired their bottling program, and for retail sales are now almost entirely invested in cans (they also sell kegs).

Brewery owner Brendan Moylan has also pulled back on bombers, shifting from the familiar 22-ounce format for so many of the beers for his Marin and Moylan’s brewing companies to 16-ounce cans, sold in four-packs.

So, what’s the matter with bombers? The main issue seems to be that they’re an awkward size—too small to provide two shared pints and, if the beer is strong, too large to drink easily by oneself if you plan to have a second one. Many times, I’ve opened a bomber, then recapped the bottle or plugged it with a cork to save for the next day—not the best way to handle/store beer. Also, bombers usually are not a great deal; per ounce of the same beer sold also in six-packs, bomber beer is often relatively costly.

With bombers on the outs, almost all newcomers to the beer scene are canning their beer.

At Pond Farm Brewing Co. in San Rafael, for example, all retail production (other than kegs) goes into four-packs of 16-ounce cans. Pond Farm co-owner and head brewer Trevor Martens says the size of a 22-ounce bottle is off the mark.

One of the biggest reasons he sees is that glass bottles, of any kind, are fragile.

“It sucks to break bottles when packaging and consumers don’t have to worry about cans breaking when they take them out to places like the beach or a pool,” Martens said.

There is yet another problem with 22-ounce bottles: They take up lots of shelf space. They can’t be stacked, and they require a tall space to fit into, and for retailers, stacking shelves with six-packs makes much more logistical sense.

Moylan says he has “never had a problem drinking a 22-ounce beer,” but he recognizes that consumers are increasingly opting for lower-alcohol options and smaller portions.

“The world has gotten a little soft,” he quipped. □