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Bubbles and claws

Will the popularity of hard seltzers last?

I basically looked past them for years. Following the trends toward lower-calorie drinks, I wrote about session beers, low-alcohol IPAs, brut IPAs, craft lagers, kombucha and non-alcoholic beer.

by
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But in 2020 I cannot ignore hard seltzers any longer. The category, centered around a colorless, fruity-tasting, bubbly liquid usually with 4 percent or 5 percent alcohol by volume (ABV), has exploded. In 2016, American producers sold 82,000 barrels of the stuff. In 2019, they reportedly made some 3 billion barrels of hard seltzer.

Hard seltzer is made by fermenting cane sugar water. Fruit or fruit flavor and carbonation are added later. Big brands like White Claw and Truly (a product of Boston Beer Co., maker of Sam Adams) have led the way, while countless lesser ones have followed. Seltzers have gained such a following that, as we've seen in the beer industry, people have grown fussy over which producers are technically "craft" and which ones are too big to be cool. In the case of making hard seltzer, the craft version tends to contain real fruit and less sugar than bigger brands, which may use fruit flavoring as a cheaper, easier technique.

My first hard seltzer was a New Year's Eve toast with San Rafael brewpub Pond Farm's 5 percent ABV grapefruit and citrus seltzer. Spritzy and vodka-clear, it was clean and fruity tasting—easy to enjoy but, as with seltzers in general, a bit thin on substance.

But dainty character is part of the point of these drinks. A 12-ounce serving of hard seltzer contains usually about 100 calories—30 percent or 40 percent

fewer than a beer of similar strength. At a time when millennial drinkers are looking for fewer calories and less alcohol, hard seltzers seem a prime alternative to rich and malty craft beer.

According to an article in *Porch Drinking*, many craft breweries are dabbling in seltzer-making but with careful attention to marketing strategies and branding. Some breweries are presenting their seltzers as basically another "beer" on the menu, while other companies are making seltzers into entirely new product lines, with no obvious link to the parent brewery. The former strategy, according to author Taylor Laabs, seems to be a way of reassuring fans and craft beer devotees that their seltzer is just another craft brewing experiment, whereas the latter seems to be an attempt to launch the product into the market on its own effervescent wings. Oskar Blues, known for its big, burly, mountain-biker-style beers, has done just this with its Wild Basin Boozy Sparkling Water brand.

So, hard seltzers are all the rage now, but we will see if they persist. I am dubious of their future. The conceptual trouble I have with hard seltzer is this: The stuff seems to draw us a step closer toward imbibing simply for the purpose of consuming alcohol.

Whereas beer contains a plethora of flavors and smells derived from malt and hops that tag along through the fermentation and packaging processes, hard seltzer is, by design, rather characterless. It is made relatively quickly and easily, and I'm calling it now: They lack the staying power of beer and, eventually—much like Zima in the 1990s—will be remembered as a brief craze of the early 21st century.

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