

Crack one open

Cans are winning as craft beers' vessel of choice

Last month, Fort Bragg's North Coast Brewing Co., a long-standing veteran of the craft beer community, announced it was releasing a beer in cans for the first time.

by Alastair Bland

I appreciated the press release, but I couldn't help but think that this would have been novel and more newsworthy a decade ago. Coming in 2020, the announcement reminded me that the canned craft beer transition is no longer news. Rather, cans are now almost ubiquitous as the packaging style of choice for craft breweries (not to mention Budweiser, Coors, Miller and friends).

Cans are light, sleek, smart and green, while glass bottles are seen as clunky artifices of the old-school past. In fact, soon more craft beer will be canned than bottled—a milestone expected this year.

Thus, canned craft beer is no longer a story in itself; it's just business as usual for thousands of breweries.

It would be more newsworthy at this point if a young brewery ventured into the retail market using glass bottles—something craft breweries increasingly want nothing to do with. They either serve all their beer in glassware for on-site consumption, or they put it in cans—either crowlers for brewpub patrons to take home or 12- to 16-ounce cans for retail distribution. (Some breweries, including Deschutes Brewery and

Lagunitas Brewing Co., sell singles in 19-ounce cans.)

A mobile service called the Can Van has cashed in on the can transition by doing on-site canning at breweries all over Northern California. But many breweries are starting to invest in their own canning machinery. East Brother Beer Co. in Richmond opened in 2016, and in the early days, the Can Van took care of their needs. More recently, owners Rob Lightner and Chris Coomber bought their own canning system.

"Makes more financial sense and gives us way more flexibility," Lightner said.

Other breweries that established themselves during the peak of the bottling era have shifted to canning—and, reportedly, finding takers for their secondhand bottling equipment is proving difficult to impossible.

The canned craft beer boom seems to have started with a company called Cask Global Canning Solutions, based in Canada. In 1999, Cask introduced a tabletop canning system that received praise from American homebrewers who tried it—mainly because the final product was easier to handle than beer in glass bottles.

But when Cask founder Peter Love presented the concept to commercial craft brewers, he remembers receiving harsh criticism.

"Several brewers told us, 'That is the dumbest idea I have ever seen. No craft beer drinker's going to buy beer in cans,'" Love said.

Other craft brewers were not so bent on bottles, and Cask found its first client with Oskar Blues Brewery in Colorado—a tiny brewery at the time, now among the nation's most recognized craft labels. Oskar Blues cans more than 200,000 barrels of beer each year, and Cask meanwhile has distributed 1,700 canning systems to beverage companies in more than 70 countries. Cask is currently working with new customers in Estonia.

In the United States, a shade less than 50 percent of craft beer is currently canned, and the Brewers Association's chief economist, Bart Watson, said he expects the canned sector to surpass the bottled this year.

As more and more of the beer market shifts to cans, it becomes clear that the bottled beer industry was, for all those years, just a glass castle waiting to shatter. □



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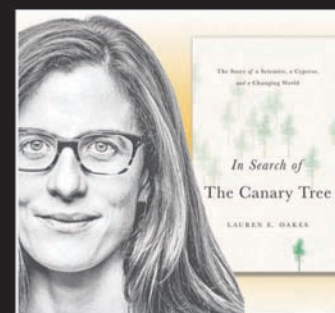
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