



GIVE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT! (OR MAYBE DON'T)

A commentary with Stephen Beaumont

Craft beer has a SKU problem. Or at least a SKU difficulty, or perhaps a SKU challenge. By whatever name, it would seem that there might just be too many beers on the market.

Contrary to what many believe, however, this proliferation of beer labels is not the result of today's unprecedented growth in the number of small-scale breweries in operation, which by most counts now exceeds 8,000 in North America, 2,000 in the United Kingdom and likely 900 or 1,000 in each of Italy and France. And neither is it necessarily manifesting itself on beer store shelves, since many releases from the smallest of craft breweries never even make it that far.

Rather, today's beer brand overload is being caused by an incessant need to keep engaged the short attention spans of many modern beer consumers. Since such beer drinkers are interested in only what is new, rare or unusual, breweries feel increasingly compelled to keep up a steady flow of new releases in order to maintain sales.

(Disclosure: I was one of a group of four people behind the recent #FlagshipFebruary movement on media, which was designed specifically to address such behavior by drawing attention to solid and dependable, year-round beers.)

This has in turn led to numerous brewers voicing concerns over how many new brands they are bound to rush to market. In a Facebook post delivered just prior to his retirement, the now-past president of the Brewers Association, Charlie Papazian, noted that “many of the craft brewers I’ve visited over the years more and more are feeling forced (against their measured judgement) to offer several types of IPAs because that is what is hot, what sells and ‘what their customers want.’”

This sentiment was later echoed by Mitch Steele, now in charge of New Realm Brewing in Atlanta, who commented that despite releasing 107 distinct beers over the course of 2018, including numerous IPA variants, he still gets told that his brewery is “not innovative.”

Of course, giving consumers what they want is considered a fundamental principle for retail of almost any sort. But it is also worth asking whether it the best way forward for a product which, for the bulk of its life, has existed outside of the mainstream? There is an argument to be made that it is not, and it begins at the early days of microbrewing development in North America.

Traveling back to the 1980s, when the earliest of what we now call craft breweries were just getting off the ground, giving the people what they want was the last thing on the minds of the men and women leading the charge. Rather, their challenge was to brew something other than what people wanted – at the time, pale and mostly pallid lagers – and then convince those same people to want their pale ales and brown ales and stouts instead. For many, indeed likely most, this meant selling their wares one beer at a time, convincing beer drinkers in their natural habitat (the bar) to try, like and continue to buy their beers.

Over time, this changed. As craft beer joined the mainstream, indeed became arguably the most important segment of the North American beer market, rather than brewers and brewery owners trying to draw the attention of beer drinkers, those same drinkers began literally lining up for a chance to buy their beers. Craft brewers still weren’t making what the masses wanted, but they had successfully convinced a significant and still growing segment of beer consumers that it really did want what they were making, no matter what that happened to be!

Today, however, the tables have turned yet again. As everyone associated with craft beer knows, IPAs are all the rage these days, particularly so if they are some new form of IPA, such as brut IPA or, especially, the much-ballyhooed hazy IPA. So brewers are now, for the first time, feeling obliged to give consumers what they want, which may or may not be a wise course to follow.

Leaving aside for the moment the questions of how many hazy IPAs the market can bear or if, after spending years teaching drinkers to embrace bitterness, it’s really such a good idea to start promoting IPAs that aren’t at all bitter, one has to wonder whether the better ethos for this time might be ‘dance with the one that brought you.’ Or to be more specific, whether it might be wiser to stay the course and rely on true innovation, rather than using flour and pectin to create cloudy beers.

There are almost certainly creative and innovative veins in brewing yet to be mined – for a recent example look no further than kettle souring, commonplace now but unthinkable only ten or twenty years ago – and it is equally likely that there are consumers champing at the bit to embrace the results. So when the haze-craze finally breaks, as most surely it must – witness the not-that-long-ago rise and fall of fruit IPAs – it would behoove brewers to have something new in hand, preferably something they could teach beer drinkers to enjoy based upon its merit rather than its novelty.
