

Beer, now with more alcohol

By Andrea Kszystyniak / World-Herald staff writer | Posted: Sunday, July 19, 2015 1:00 am

Around the world, beers are getting bigger and bolder, and some local brewers are riding along with the trend.

Domestic beers such as Budweiser or Pabst Blue Ribbon usually have an alcohol by volume of about 5 percent. But crack open the top of a craft beer, and that baby might have substantially more alcohol.

Market research firm Mintel found that 1 in 4 beers launched globally last year had an alcohol by volume of 6.5 percent or higher. That was up from 1 in 7 in 2012. Alcohol by volume, or ABV, is a measure standardized around the world that indicates how much alcohol is in a beverage.

In Omaha, Lindsey Clements and her husband, Thomas, are planning a new brewery that will feature mostly high-gravity beers, or beers with a high ABV. The Clementses hope to open the brewery, Vis Major, next year.

Head brewer Thomas Clements makes many of his beers between 7 and 9 percent ABV. It's necessary to brew beers with this amount of alcohol to get the flavor that he wants.

"If you're going to get a craft beer, you are paying the extra dollar, so I think that you should get a little bit more out of it," he said.

Though high-alcohol beers are trending up, Omaha has also seen an uptick in session beers, which usually have an alcohol content of less than 5 percent. They're created so you can drink more than one in a reasonable time period without becoming too tipsy.

John Fahrer, head brewer and part owner of Scriptown Brewery, crafts primarily session beers. He said many people don't want to drink high ABV beers everyday. With the Scriptown model, customers can hang out at the bar and drink a few beers instead of drinking one or two and then stumbling home to fall asleep.

"That was really at the core of our business model, to try to become a neighborhood place," he said.

People can be more responsible with beers that are less heavy.

"I think you have a moral obligation to do that for people," he said.

Options allow the consumer to decide the style of beer they want to drink based on the activities they're doing, Lindsey Clements said. She might opt for a session beer if she were going to the lake, out on a picnic or wasn't "looking to get a buzz." High-gravity beers might be better for pairing with a nice meal or a night out.

Clements said people often equate higher alcohol content with a superior quality. But it's actually more difficult to brew a light beer.

Brewing high gravity is easier, Thomas Clements said — you can hide your mistakes beneath flavors. There's not as much flavor to hide subtle errors in the brewing process when it comes to light beers. It's much easier to ruin a batch.

But session beers are cheaper to produce, he said. There's not as much product going into the beer.

Fahrer agrees. He said higher-gravity beers require more raw ingredients such as malt. His recipes are more traditional, "old-world" beer styles.

Chris Bettini, a bartender at the Crescent Moon, said that breweries enjoy creating higher alcohol beers because they are a way to showcase the possibilities of beer.

This time of year, there won't be as much high-alcohol beer around, said Eric Brouillette, certified cicerone and general manager at Local Beer Patio and Kitchen. Higher-gravity beer styles such as barleywines and imperial stouts are referred to as "winter warmers" and are more apt to be on the market in the fall and winter.

But there are some high-gravity beers hitting the local market this summer. Zipline Brewing Company just released a double IPA with an ABV of 8.5 percent. Ultimately, Bettini said, this is America, and we like everything bigger.

Brewers have taken styles that at one time might have been 4 to 6 percent ABV and made them heartier. For brewers, higher alcohol beers are fun to play around with.

"We've taken what would have been a lower hopped beer and we've hopped the living bejeezus out of it," Bettini said.

Jonny Forsyth, global drinks analyst at Mintel, said the craft beer movement has made high-strength beer an acceptable option for consumers.

"And not just acceptable, but trendy and sophisticated."

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