



TOPIC: MARKETING &amp; SALES, PRODUCT INNOVATION

# ALL THE LIGHT MOVES: IN SEARCH OF SALES AND NEW CUSTOMERS, BREWERIES EMBRACE LIGHT LAGERS

🕒 8 min read

Last August, customers clamored for an unlikely beer from Rhinegeist Brewing. Instead of a hazy IPA or barrel-aged stout, fans were hunting down Cincy Light, a 110-calorie light lager.

“We saw tweets helping people find which stores stocked it and how much they had, and people filling up on shopping carts,” Adam Bankovich, the CEO, says of the lager produced with Cincy Reigns, a fundraising platform that supports University of Cincinnati’s student-athletes.

They haven't stopped. As of this fall, Cincy Light is Rhinegeist's second-best-selling brand, following only its flagship Truth IPA, and 24-packs of Cincy Light have carved out cold-box real estate alongside national light lagers. "Cincy Light has way exceeded our highest expectations," Bankovich says.

American craft beer ascended as a flavorful rebuttal to mainstream lagers that prioritized ever-decreasing calorie counts over taste. Stouts and amber ales both looked and tasted different, proof that looking beyond the light (lager) could be successful. So began craft brewing's decades-long flavor trip, and customers climbed aboard for bitter IPAs, barrel-aged stouts, and sour ales with serious pucker.

Intensities overshadowed a not-so-tiny truth: American beer drinkers increasingly loved light lagers. By 2018, America's best-selling beers were Bud Light, Coors Light, and Miller Lite, the first time light lagers held the top three sales slots. Last year's culture-wars clash toppled Bud Light from the sales summit, but it's still a top-three brand today, along with Modelo and Michelob Ultra.

Craft breweries are finally seeing the light. Just like the restaurant that adds a burger and fries to their menu, craft breweries are releasing crowd-pleasing light lagers. They crisply deliver value and refreshment in a not-too-boozy format. After all, one can't drink double IPAs all day.

Light lagers "are a huge part of the market," says David Deline, the president of Colorado's German-inspired Prost Brewing. "As an industry, we've somewhat overlooked it. The consumer is telling us, 'Hey guys, this is what we want.'"

### **Language Is Key to Selling Light Lagers**

Light lagers are so stitched into American beer's fabric that it's easy to forget that they're a relatively recent phenomenon. The trailblazing 96-calorie Miller Lite only went national in 1975, the same year Anchor released Cascade-hopped Liberty Ale.

Craft beer and light lagers rose in tandem, stepping into roles as foils for the marketplace. These barley wines are nothing like light lagers! Frou-frou craft beer? No thanks. I'm all light. The act again plays out at 95-calorie Garage Beer, which counts NFL stars Jason and Travis Kelce as investors and pitchmen.

The brand's marketing copy has a contrarian craft bent. *No bitterness. Beer that tastes like beer. Definitely not an IPA.*

Ouch. The dig hits deeper when you learn that the Garage Beer brand was developed by Braxton Brewing, a craft brewery in Covington, Kentucky, that produces hazy Tropic Flare IPA. For Braxton, the light lager met a glaring need.

"Our true fan wanted a beer that they could just drink," Braxton co-founder and CEO Jake Rouse told me in an interview last year. "You didn't have to roll out the red carpet for a bottle share."

The liquid is good, especially the lime version, but a potent selling point in light lagers is the name. Garage Beer communicate a clear occasion for consumption. It's for drinking in the garage while noodling on weekend projects or hanging with friends, redefining workspace as play space.

With light lagers, breweries are increasingly leaning into evocative language to steer customers to moments when they're craving something crisp and cold. The temperature might be brewing's adjective of the year. Revolution Brewing now offers the Cold Time "premium lager," Pipeworks Brewing makes Cold Crispy Lime, and Virginia Beer Co. produces the standalone Cold Drinking Beer brand. Its tagline: serve cold, chill together.

This summer, Great Lakes Brewing in Cleveland, Ohio, released the 100-calorie Cold Rush light lager. One hope is attracting customers beyond its core demographic. "Everyone in craft is fighting for craft," says interim co-CEO Chris Brown. "Maybe we can bring people into the franchise through a light lager, rather than dividing the current pie into smaller pieces."

### **Craft Light Lagers Can Offer More Flavor**

Craft beer fans that drank double IPAs and imperial stouts a decade or two ago, in their 20s, are getting older. Jobs, kids, worse hangovers: Life's stressors and time's ravages make it difficult to crush boozy beers, a fact that's not lost on Ken Hehir, the brand marketing director for Oskar Blues.

"There are only so many 19.2-ounce Dale's Pale Ales you can drink at one event," Hehir says of the company's 6.5 percent ABV flagship. "We've personally experienced that."

Of late, Oskar Blues has broken Dale's into its own sub-brand that ranges across the strength spectrum from a double IPA to a lower-alcohol Easy IPA, NA pilsner, and a light lager.

"Where we have light lager on tap, it's our highest-velocity brand by a long way," Hehir says. Dale's Light Lager checks in at 95 calories per 12-ounce serving and delivers a bit more complexity (floral fragrance, biscuits and honeysuckle on the sip) than the average light lager. "The more important thing is that we have a really tasty, drinkable light beer that plays in that space," Hehir says.

For craft breweries dabbling in light lagers, characterful ingredients can drive differentiation. Prost Brewing refrains from using adjuncts in its German-style lagers like the 100-calorie Leichtbier ("light beer"). "By using an all-malt bill, we can make a dynamic light lager with lots of flavor," says Chris O'Connor, vice president of brewery operations.

Troy Aikman's ownership stake in Eight Beer, a light-lager brand headquartered in Austin, Texas, tends to generate headlines, but the ingredients are also a selling point. Eight uses organic grains and German hops while hitting the 90-calorie mark. "We see a clear opportunity to make a better version of something that is tried and true," former CEO Doug Campbell told me last year.

Boston Beer Company also champions ingredient provenance in Samuel Adams American Light, which debuted this year and contains Montana barley and Washington hops. "It delivers the hop character and body you'd expect from a craft beer, while still being smooth and easy to drink," says John McElhenny, the senior brand manager for Samuel Adams.

Narragansett Beer is led by its flagship lager, but its Atlantic Light somewhat quietly sells around 20,000 barrels each year. The light lager is just 3.5 percent ABV, opening Atlantic to occasions like a weekday lunch or a Monday-night football game. “You can have a beer or two or three, and you’re just all right,” says president Mark Hellendrung. “It doesn’t get in the way of the rest of your week.”

The Providence, Rhode Island, brewery is also finding a ready home in bars and restaurants, like the Bartaco chain that prioritizes unique brands over standards mainstream offerings. Think: Sol instead of Corona, and Atlantic Light in lieu of Bud Light. “Bars and restaurants definitely need a light beer,” Hellendrung says.

### **Light Lagers Can Meet Taproom Needs**

It’s impossible for most craft breweries to compete with national and multinational breweries on sheer economies of scale for raw materials and production efficiencies. But there is value to producing a light lager for sale in taprooms, where customers might crave an easygoing lager.

Great Notion Brewing, which is based in Portland, Oregon, operates six brick-and-mortar taprooms across Oregon, Washington, and California that serves its hazy IPAs and fruited sour ales alongside 4.2 percent ABV Notion Lite lager. “We want something to offer to the person who walks in off the street to our taprooms—and sometimes walks out because we don’t have Budweiser, Coors Light, or MGD,” says Paul Reiter, a co-founder and the CEO.

In 2004, Short’s Brewing opened in Bellaire, Michigan, a rural village of around 1,000 people where “nobody was drinking IPAs,” says Christa Brenner, the brand and marketing director. In time, Short’s became known for experimental releases inspired by peanut butter and jelly or carrot cake, but back then, the brewery needed an approachable beer that appealed to blue-collar locals.

Three months after opening, Short’s created the no-frills, all-malt Local’s Light lager. Two decades later, Local’s Light remains an affordable mainstay in the Bellaire pub—a draft pour is \$2—and in the market, where a half-barrel might cost around \$110. “The grain bill and hop bill are relatively cost-effective for us, so we want to pass that on to accounts,” Brenner says, adding that tap placements tend to be permanent. Local’s Light is now Michigan’s top-selling craft lager, and 24 cans cost around \$21.

For breweries of all scales, the competition for light-lager sales is ceaseless. Breweries regularly tweak recipes to slim down a lager and claim the low-calorie throne, or they advertise the follies of cutting caloric hairs. Look at that Miller Lite commercial that tells viewers that Miller Lite has “more taste and one more calorie than Michelob Ultra.”

Craft breweries that create compelling light lager brands that deliver on flavor and value can carve out space on tap lists and store shelves. “This is an industry of occasions and price points and refreshment, and you can design different beers for those different occasions,” says Narragansett’s Hellendrung. “Every account in America should have an elevated light beer.”

By Joshua M. Bernstein