



TOPIC: PRODUCT INNOVATION, QUALITY

HARD SELTZER OPTIONS FOR BREWPUBS

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Packaged hard seltzers continued to show strong sales through 2020 [i], and their sales are predicted to continue to grow in the next several years [ii]. In addition to numerous craft production breweries, many brewpubs are also brewing and serving hard seltzers to boost their bottom line [iii]. Tap accounts are also opening up at bars and restaurants [iv]. Brewpubs have many options when it comes to serving hard seltzers. These may increase customer satisfaction and drive return visits.

Packaged hard seltzers are brewed by fermenting a high gravity sugar wash [v]. Later, this fermented sugar wash is diluted and cleaned up — most often by filtering through activated carbon. Then, the flavoring is added. The flavoring may be accompanied by an addition of sugar or acid. The flavoring may also contain preservatives.

Brewpubs have the option of fermenting the beverage at working strength. Most brewpubs are not set up for high gravity brewing and a working strength fermentation should yield a “blank” seltzer that requires less cleanup.

A brewer taking this option could also opt to add the flavors when the sugar wash is mixed, prior to fermentation, saving a step. Depending on the flavoring, this may add nutrients to the sugar wash, and therefore require a smaller yeast nutrient addition. However, the fermentation would need to yield an acceptably clear beverage, as carbon filtration would remove any flavoring present during the fermentation. Additionally, fermentation may remove or lessen flavors from the beverage. Also complicating matters is the fact that many flavorings contain alcohol, and this would have to take into consideration — both in terms of how the final alcohol content of the beverage is impacted and if the brewery can legally do this. Before attempting a full-sized batch using this method, the brewer should have at least one successful small-scale test fermentation.

Another approach would be to brew an unflavored base beverage. If the brewpub makes a “blank” hard seltzer, this will allow the beverage to be cleaned up by fining or filtration. And the flavoring could be added at the bar. A single serving tank of clear, flavorless hard seltzer could yield a variety of flavors at the bar. The simplest approach would be to concoct one or more mixtures of flavoring, sugar, and acid. A measured amount of the flavoring mix added to the blank hard seltzer would yield a flavored hard seltzer. If fresh fruit juice — as opposed to fruit extract — is used as the basis for the flavoring, the particulates in the juice could mask small amounts of haze in the blank hard seltzer. Fresh fruit juice — or any flavoring that isn't an artificial flavor — could also appeal to customers who desire natural ingredients. In that case, any slight haze in the beverage becomes a feature, not a bug. Adding juice to the blank seltzer at the bar would likely appeal to many. However, because of the sugar content, juice should not be added to kegs, growlers, or crowlers. This would also apply to any flavoring that contained sugar.

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Informal studies have shown customers prefer a sweeter, more flavorful beverage in a blind taste test. However, when selecting hard seltzers at a store, the Calorie count becomes the major determining factor [vi]. If a blank seltzer is flavored at the bar, the Calorie count will not appear on the glass. Thus, a brewpub could produce a more flavorful (and sweet) version of the beverage, if desired. A brewpub would also have the option of offering sweet or “unsweet” versions of the beverage. Brewpubs should consider how many options — different flavors and perhaps levels of sweetness — to offer. In some ways, more are better, but too many could slow down the bartenders and waitstaff. An excessive number of choices may also bewilder customers.

A brewpub could treat their seltzer flavors in a similar manner to the types of beer they offer — offer a core number of year-round flavors, perhaps with an option to sweeten each, and a rotating flavor of the month or season. If the region is known for any agricultural product that could be used to flavor a hard seltzer, that would be a good option for one of the offerings.

Flavorings in a hard seltzer will taint the serving lines. Another advantage of pushing a blank hard seltzer is that it won't flavor tap lines, allowing the brewpub to switch from seltzer to beer, if needed.

Brewpubs that wish to serve hard seltzers as similar to canned seltzers as possible may need to rebalance one or more lines of their draft system to dispense a more highly carbonated beverage. Hard seltzers are generally carbonated to around 2.8 volumes of CO₂, whereas typical craft beer is served at 2.5–2.6 volumes of CO₂. In order to serve seltzer carbonated to a higher degree, the length of the tap line (or vertical distance traversed) will have to be increased. Installing a tap line with smaller interior diameter (ID) tubing will also work. Unless the brewpub has reason to believe sales of their hard seltzer will be strong, dispensing hard seltzer at normal beer levels of carbonation would save the hassle.

Finally, the glassware used for hard seltzer should be something other than a shaker pint. Although there is no “official” glassware for a hard seltzer, a straight-sided glass is what most hard seltzer advertisements feature. The brewpub additionally has the option to serve the drink over ice or to garnish it with a wedge of citrus fruit or a cocktail skewer of cherries and orange (or any other combination that makes sense).

Serving the seltzer over ice will, of course, dilute the alcohol content. Depending on how sensitive the brewpubs customers are to that, it may make sense to dispense a higher alcohol version of the beverage that becomes a 4–5% ABV drink when the ice melts. Ten fluid ounces of a 6% ABV seltzer and 2.0 oz. of ice yields a 12-oz. serving at 5% ABV. Any flavoring will, of course, also dilute the alcoholic content, so — in order to serve a 5% ABV seltzer — the brewpub would need 10 fl. oz. of 6% ABV seltzer and the total volume of the flavoring and ice together would need to total 2 fl. oz.

For a general solution for any alcohol content and drink volume, use the equation $CV = CV$ (concentration times volume equals concentration times volume). For example, to produce 16 fl. oz. of 4% ABV seltzer from a 5.5% ABV blank seltzer, you would set up the equation like this:

$$CV = CV = 4 (\%ABV) \times 16 (\text{fl. oz.}) = 5.5 (\%ABV) \times V (\text{fl. oz.})$$

Solving for V yields 11.6 — so the drink would require 11.6 fl. oz. of the 5.5% seltzer and the remaining 4.4 fl. oz. would be filled by ice and flavoring.

Of course, you wouldn't want the bartender to have to do these calculations each time a drink is served. The calculation would be made beforehand and a generic mix proscribed — i.e., add this amount of blank seltzer to the glass plus this much flavoring, then fill with ice (or soft seltzer). And note that the flavoring may also contain alcohol.

If the bartender mixes the drink at the bar, or adds garnish, a brewery taproom more closely resembles a traditional bar in this respect — and this is something that may appeal to some customers. Bartenders may also see an increase in their tips if customers perceived they are doing more than just pulling a tap.

By Dr. Chris Colby

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