



TOPIC: PRODUCT INNOVATION

# HOP WATER: FUNCTIONAL BEYOND BEER

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In pursuit of relevancy in a growing beverage landscape that is focusing more on wellness trends, breweries find themselves looking at options that are accessible while straddling brewing and new opportunities. One product with a foot in both worlds is hop water: a non-alcoholic (NA), calorie-free, hop-infused beverage that utilizes brewing knowledge while targeting the modern consumer preferences. It isn't just fizzy water for beer fans, but a serious player that can also explore the functional beverage market that includes kombucha, botanical seltzers, and electrolyte-enhanced waters. With interest growing amongst craft breweries and other beverage innovators, this category can offer a low-risk path to diversify portfolios, expand NA offerings, and efficiently use hop contracts and production capacity.

# WHAT AND WHY HOP WATER?

Hop water is carbonated water infused with hops, which some enhance with botanicals or fruit essences. It offers familiarity with aroma and bitterness from hops without alcohol, sugar, or calories. It has gained traction alongside NA beers, but with a production process more akin to a flavored seltzer rather than brewing.

Hop water's rise comes as more consumers question alcohol's role in their lifestyle, mainly driven by younger demographics. It also intersects with the broader surge of functional beverage demand, where consumers are looking for more hydration, relaxation, or even perceived cognitive or immune support. Hop water already contains polyphenols and terpenes that can align with these values without making explicit health claims.

The global NA beverage market is expected to grow at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 7.4% through 2030, with functional beverages critical to that growth. [1]

For breweries, the opportunity is twofold:

- Tap into a new market without significant retooling.
- Leverage hop contracts that may be underutilized during beer volume reductions.

## WHO IS DRINKING IT?

Consumers today are more health-conscious, sustainability-minded, and open to new experiences than ever before. The rise of the sober curious movement, with the increasing popularity of products focused on health and wellness, has opened the door to drinks that meet these expectations. [2, 3]

Hop water ticks several boxes for consumers:

Low-calorie or no-calorie

No alcohol, sugar, or artificial ingredients

Plant-based and gluten-free

Perceived functional value via botanicals

Alignment with other functional beverage types that offer more than hydration

Brands like Hoplark, Lagunitas, Sierra Nevada, and regional innovators have taken the lead. Success is buoyed by existing brand trust, an important factor for consumers considering exploring unfamiliar beverages.

“Hop water isn’t just a fad for us,” says Jenna Blair Bautista, Senior Quality Analyst at Lagunitas Brewing. “Our Hoppy Refresher has been in production for seven years and is now part of a growing NA category that makes up more than 10% of our brand profile.”

## BEYOND BUBBLES AND BITTERNESS

Developing a hop water requires balancing familiarity with freshness. Choosing the right hop can be challenging, especially without malt or yeast balancing the flavors. For example, Lagunitas started using hop pellets and yeast but ultimately transitioned to hop extracts, improving stability and shelf life. “We did extensive trials with hop extract companies to mimic mouthfeels and bitterness with polyphenols and hop acids,” says Bautista. “It allowed us to have a stable product with less discoloration.”

Other production considerations may include:

- Hop variety: Citra, Mosaic, and Sabro are popular for their bright aromatics.
- Techniques: Cold steeping, water-based dry hopping, and emulsification are all common.
- Water quality: Deaerated, filtered water, perhaps adjusted with food-grade lactic acid to drop pH from ~5.3 to 3.6 for microbial stability and flavor enhancement.
- Flavor layering: Botanical infusions, zest, or teas can diversify offerings [4]
- Functional ingredients: Nootropics, adaptogens, vitamins, and hemp-derived cannabis [5, 6]

Sensory validation is also key. Test batches across various temperatures and dates since production to ensure consistency and longevity, since these may be far beyond typical beer quality consistency timelines.

## QUALITY, SAFETY, AND SHELF STABILITY

Hop water lacks alcohol and has minimal acidity, making it more susceptible to spoilage. Without the natural microbial hurdles like alcohol, producers must rely on pH control, sanitation, and packaging to maintain product safety. “We test our production water biweekly and every batch of hop water in the fermenter, brite tank, and package (start, mid, and end of run) for coliforms and beer spoilage organisms,” says Bautista. She also emphasizes the need for complete clean-in-place (CIP) cycles and enhanced protective measures for packaging staff, which are commonly seen in food manufacturing.

**Shelf-life extension strategies:** Low pH targeting (<4.0), pasteurization or aseptic filling, preservatives, nitrogen flushing. [7]

**Common quality concerns:** Flavor fade/shift, bitterness spikes, oxidation haze, unintended microbial fermentation.

Establishing Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Plan (HACCP) quality protocols, appropriate packaging validation, and clear Standard Operating Procedures for sensory evaluation are critical for a shelf-stable product. [8]

## NAVIGATING THE REGULATORY LANDSCAPE

Hop water avoids beer’s excise tax and labeling complexities, but it is still a regulated product. In the U.S., hop water falls under Food and Drug Administration (FDA) oversight, meaning:

- Products must include Nutrition Facts Panel [9]
- Ingredients and allergens must be disclosed
- Any “natural” or functional claims must be truthful, not misleading, and substantiated

“From a production standpoint, labeling was tricky,” says Bautista. “We had to adapt our bottling line to accommodate back labels with nutritional facts, and worked closely with our hop supplier to ensure all ingredients were compliant.”

Shared equipment can present additional risks, particularly for breweries producing products with gluten, dairy, or sugar. Food-grade cleaning protocols and scheduling buffers are necessary to prevent cross-contamination. [10]

## DOES HOP WATER FIT YOUR BREWERY?

For producers evaluating hop water, logistical readiness and market alignment should be considered:

Consideration	Questions to Ask	Implications
Production Readiness	Do we have the ability to prevent cross-contamination with food-grade cleaning? Can our team manage non-fermented, shelf-stable workflows?	Hop water requires a robust quality plan and sanitation protocols to ensure product safety, similar to food production standards.
Regulatory Compliance	Are we familiar with FDA labeling and ingredient disclosure requirements? Can we adapt our packaging for a Nutrition Facts Panel?	Unlike beer, hop water falls under FDA oversight and must meet food labeling standards.
Flavor Execution	Do we have access to high-quality hop extracts or emulsions? Can we run pilot sensory tests?	Consistency is key; using the right ingredients prevents bitterness spikes or flavor degradation.
Brand and Market Fit	Does our audience value wellness products? Is there a local demand for NA or functional beverages?	Hop water is most successful when aligned with existing or emerging customer needs.
Portfolio Strategy	Are we looking to diversify with low-alcohol or seasonal offerings? Do we need quick-turnover products?	Hop water is a fast, low-risk way to expand non-alcoholic options without altering core beer production.

Hop water can be launched, with considerations for sanitation practices and quality testing, as a draft-only option, a taproom exclusive, or a full packaged line for retail. Some brewers integrate it into seasonal programs or wellness-themed collaborations to test the market before scaling up.

Hop water is more than a marketing experiment; it is a scalable product grounded in brewing expertise with real staying power. For producers looking to meet consumer demands and diversify offerings, it presents a low-barrier, high-opportunity path forward to also step into the evolving functional beverage space. As lines blur between craft, wellness, and performance, hop water positions producers to play in adjacent markets without leaving behind the core competencies of craft.

“It’s more important than ever that breweries expand their profiles,” says Bautista. “Hop waters are easier and safer to produce than NA beers, and consumers are asking for them.”

With the right approach considering quality, regulatory compliance, and flavor innovation, hop water can become a meaningful part of what consumers enjoy and a refreshing, future-focused product.

By Frances Tietje-Wang

[1] <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/nonalcoholic-beverage-market>

[2] <https://nielseniq.com/global/en/insights/education/2024/rise-of-functional-beverages/>

[3] <https://www.nytimes.com/wirecutter/reviews/best-hop-water/>

[4] <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-ingredients-packaging/generally-recognized-safe-gras>

[5] [https://hopwtr.com/pages/our-story?  
srltid=AfmBOoorhmE2WhytW45PSHISsdOdx\\_g7Cxa7obo\\_GNvJSV5F2b8ImBp1x](https://hopwtr.com/pages/our-story?srltid=AfmBOoorhmE2WhytW45PSHISsdOdx_g7Cxa7obo_GNvJSV5F2b8ImBp1x)

[6] <https://hopbev.com/sparkling-cbd-water/>

[7] <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-21/chapter-I/subchapter-B/part-114>

[8] <https://www.fda.gov/food/guidance-documents-regulatory-information-topic-food-and-dietary-supplements/bottled-watercarbonated-soft-drinks-guidance-documents-regulatory-information>

[9] <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-21/chapter-I/subchapter-B/part-101>

[10] <https://www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-modernization-act-fsma/fsma-final-rule-preventive-controls-human-food>