



TOPIC: MARKETING AND SALES, PRODUCT INNOVATION

MIGHT THE NEXT WAVE BE MALTY?

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A commentary with Stephen Beaumont

Remember when competition in the special release market was all about bitterness? When having – or at least claiming to have – the highest number of IBUs in your beer was a source of consummate pride? When the letters I, P, and A, strung together, actually meant something?

Sure, you do! I mean, it wasn't even all that long ago, really, just a little over a decade. Frankly, at the time many thought the Hop Wars might never end!

Of course, when hoppiness reached tongue-ripping proportions, something had to give, and that stimulated to a return to balanced bitterness. A short while later, hops staged a comeback, but this time with emphasis on aroma rather than bitterness, evidenced by the proliferation of hazy or 'juicy' IPAs and double dry-hopped beers in all manner of styles. At the same time, drinkers looking for a new direction in beer turned to ales defined not by their hops, but by the bacteria used to adjust the pH of their wort and the unconventional yeasts employed during fermentation.

Which brings up to where we are today, in a market filled with aroma-forward pale ales and IPAs and kettle soured or mixed-fermentation beers. And to the logical question of what comes next?

While it's certain that hoppy beers aren't going to disappear any day soon – in fact, true bitterness in IPAs seems to be staging a bit of a comeback – and kettle sours will probably be with us in some form or another for a while to come, you can bet that there is a new trend waiting in the wings somewhere. And it might just be malt.

(Of course, it could be a focus on water profile, but as I know from hosting countless beer education sessions over the years, it's all but impossible to get your average beer drinker worked up about water.)

It's not that far-fetched, really. As they have demonstrated time and again in the past, beer drinkers in general and craft beer consumers in particular can get enthusiastic about the ingredients in their beer if they are given some information regarding: a) What the ingredient is; and b) How it affects the flavour of the beer. Evidence of this can be clearly seen in hops that have grown sufficiently popular that they make it into beer names – think Citra, Nelson Sauvin and Galaxy, just for starters – and yeasts that have become de facto 'styles' unto themselves, witness Brettanomyces and kveik.

Now imagine applying this same logic to, say, Munich or Biscuit malt in a beer that is a malt-forward as the typical New England IPA is hop aroma-focused. Make a big deal about it on the label, explaining that this specific malt contributes not just sugars for fermentation, but also a great deal of very specific aromas and flavours, and maybe even throw a reference into the name of the beer. Might not beer buyers get as excited about the malt as they do about the hops, even looking for other beers with similar malt profiles?

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Or maybe the answer isn't the way in or degree to which the barley is malted. Maybe the answer is the grain itself!

Do you recall the American wheat ale? I sure do. Back in the 1980s it was all the rage, principally, I think, because it provided microbrewery cred – proof that the beer wasn't the same as a traditional big beer lager – while also offering an approachable palate. The light and slightly citrusy grain was the key, and until brewers started throwing buckets of fruit extracts into them, wheat ales were all the rage.

Today, while wheat still plays a central role in beers like gose and Berliner weisse, often in combination with fruit – not quite proof that history repeats itself, but close – few beer labels pay any sort of tribute to the grain. In fact, it's likely that most people who drink Berliner weisse have no idea that the second word is a historical reference to wheat. Perhaps it's time for wheat to make its comeback, just in a more forceful and flavourful fashion.

Equally, rye might be a malt of the future, particularly given the fast rising popularity of rye whiskeys. Train a spotlight on the grain's spicy character by building a beer that emphasizes it and watch drinkers respond. (And yes, I am aware of the short lived rye IPA boom of several years back, but few of those beers actually emphasized the grain, instead offering ample hoppiness layered over and under a hint of peppery grain.)

After rye, maybe oats, or buckwheat. Or take a cue from some British brewers and talk up the use of Marris Otter or some other variety of specialized barley malt. Out in Alberta, Canada, a brewery called Last Best tracked grain from one specific farm to an independent maltster to their brewery and brewed a beer made exclusively from it, and promoted it as such! Their Alberta neighbour, Blindman Brewing, went one step further, partnering with farmer and maltster to produce a custom malt from grain farmed in the traditional fashion with draft horses and making a stock ale out of it – telling the whole story on the side of the can.

The point being that there is as much diversity in grain and malt as there is in hops. The key lies in engaging the consumer by telling them the story behind it all, preferably with the same sort of enthusiasm usually reserved for the latest so-experimental-it's-not-even-named-yet hop.