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WHY BREWERIES ARE OPTING FOR SMALLER PACKAGE SIZES

 7 min read

Todd Ahsmann knows some drinkers treat Goose Island's Bourbon County Brand Stout bottles as decorative objects. The embossed 16.9-ounce bottles with flag-like labels are certainly eye-catching, but they remain unopened less for looks than the liquid's potency. The barrel-aged imperial stout is more than 14 percent ABV, a number that's tough for some drinkers to stomach outside of weekends and celebratory moments.

"We want people to drink our beers instead of treating them like trophies," says Ahsmann, the president of Goose Island.

This November, Goose Island aims to maximize drinking occasions by minimizing serving size. The brewery will sell the imperial stout in four-packs of 10-ounce bottles, a more manageable amount that might encourage drinkers to not “save it for special occasions,” Ahsmann says. (Limited-edition variants will remain in 16.9-ounce bottles.)

Brewing giants sell beer in varied formats, from seven-ounce bottles of Miller High Life to 25-ounce cans of Natural Light and 16-ounce Bud Light cans sold by the 24-pack. No number is off limits in the pursuit of shelf space and market differentiation.

By comparison, craft brewers are largely wedded to the same volumes. Care for an IPA in a 12-ounce bottle, 16-ounce can, or 19.2-ounce stovepipe? Craft brewers “didn’t look at pack size for innovation,” says Brian Grossman, chief brewer and second-generation brewery owner at Sierra Nevada in Mills River, North Carolina.

But as affordability and moderation become key issues, breweries are shrinking can and bottle sizes to prove that big taste comes in small packages. This March, New Belgium Brewing began selling Voodoo Ranger Juice Force IPA in eight-packs of 7.5-ounce cans. Hopewell Brewing, in Chicago, offers eight-ounce cans of Lil Buddy Lager and a line of THC drinks, Choom, similarly packaged in stubby cans. And Sierra Nevada recently introduced 8.4-ounce cans of Pils sold in multiples of eight. “Pack size is a new lever to pull,” Grossman says.

Smaller Package Sizes Can Create Consumer Affordability

In these economically uncertain times, beer drinkers are clenching their credit cards and seeking value. As of early September, dollar sales of craft four-packs and six-packs had declined, respectively, 3.3 percent and 6.9 percent from a year earlier, while 12-packs increased 2.6 percent, according to NIQ data analyzed by 3 Tier Beverages.

“Affordability is one of the biggest drivers right now,” says Dan Kopman, senior policy advisor for the World Brewing Alliance. And it’s no short-lived blip. With continued housing scarcity driving up costs to rent and own, affordability will fiscally impact beer purchases for the foreseeable future.

This puts craft breweries in a bind. The industry ascended by offering beers that delivered big flavors, discovering that drinkers would pay extra for beers that tasted different than light lagers.

“People had a mindset that \$10 for a six-pack was totally reasonable,” said Shaun Belongie, CEO at New Belgium Brewing.

Customers paid even more during the mid- to late-2010s, lining up to spend \$16 (and often more) on four-packs of then-novel hazy IPAs. The queues have cooled, and hazy IPAs are commonly found at convenience stores for maybe \$3 or \$4 per 19.2-ounce can.

Moreover, that \$10 six-pack now averages around \$12, according to NIQ data, due to increased costs in raw materials, labor, utilities, rent and more. “There’s something clearly happening where you cross that threshold and people are like, ‘I don’t know, I like craft beer, but maybe there’s another premium product that’s going to give me a better value,’ ” Belongie says.

To deliver value, New Belgium packaged Voodoo Ranger Juice Force IPA in 7.5-ounce cans sold by the eight-pack for around \$9 or \$10, or several dollars cheaper than a six-pack of 12-ounce cans of the same IPA.

The move helps create “different price points for different consumers,” Belongie says. The Mini Rippers, as the cans are called, can bring beer into new occasions like quick-sip shots with friends. New Belgium is also encouraging retailers to break apart eight-packs to sell cans individually. “The more that we mix up formats to get to a variety of price options, the better chance we have for them to give us a chance,” Belongie says.

Staking claim to a smaller package size can also help a brewery stand apart. Since 2019, Hopewell has sold its low-alcohol Lil Buddy lager in stubby eight-ounce cans. “They feel iconic,” says Samantha Lee, a cofounder.

When the brewery began packaging Choom, a line of drinks legally infused with hemp-derived THC, it opted for the same squat can for cross-brand resonance. “The format draws people in and looks unique on the shelf,” Lee says, adding that she likes the fun-loving, lighthearted vibe that the can communicates. “We’re not trying to be a wellness brand.”

How Can Size Impacts Perception and Taps Into Moderation

Governmental regulations forbid manufacturers from making health claims about the benefits of consuming alcohol. Companies instead use slim can to implicitly communicate the low-calorie luster of hard seltzers and light lagers. When Yuengling began packaging Flight, its 95-calorie light lager, in slim cans, sales increased by nearly 40 percent, says David Reny, the former regional sales director.

Now the CEO of Eight Brewing, Reny oversaw the switch to slim cans for the company’s flagship, the 90-calorie Eight Elite Light Beer. “The can immediately resonates as better for you,” Reny says. Eight also revamped its language to emphasize that the additive-free beer is made with organic ingredients, attributes reinforced by the slender format. “The canister makes a big difference,” Reny says.

For around three years, Sierra Nevada workshopped a sub-5 percent ABV pilsner, first for the European market and later for the United States. As the brewery readied the stateside release, Sierra Nevada packaged the punchy Pils in an 8.4-ounce can. The diminutive size is ideal, Grossman says, for ensuring that the lower-alcohol pilsner (4.7 percent ABV) remains crisp and cold from first sip to final gulp.

The 8.4-ounce can could also appeal to moderation-minded consumers. While zebra striping, the practice of rotating in no- to low-alcohol beers and beverages during drinking occasions, a crisp nip of pilsner might be a nice break from stronger cocktails or IPAs. “People are looking to extend their drinking sessions,” Grossman says.

Bigger Package Sizes Are Also Appealing

Going big while other breweries go small can also pay dividends. Allagash Brewing in Portland, Maine, is seeing success by packaging its Tripel and barrel-aged Curieux in cork-and-cage 750 milliliter bottles. “Tripel is consistently the top-selling 750 milliliter bottle in the country,” says Jason Perkins, the brewmaster.

Increasingly, Perkins sees package stores stocking the brewery’s large-format bottles, which excel at parties, dinner tables and gifting. “As a brand, Tripel is actually growing, and we feel that there’s always going to be a spot for that package in the right place.”

New Holland Brewing’s flagship beer is Dragon’s Milk, an 11 percent ABV imperial stout aged in bourbon barrels. The continued growth of the Dragon’s Milk family helped the Holland, Michigan, brewery grow overall dollar sales about 3 percent in the first six months of 2025. “Dragon’s Milk is driving the company,” says Jake Maddux, the brand manager.

The success can partly be attributed to the varied formats. For sharing with friends, there’s a 22-ounce bottle, while the four-pack of 12-ounce bottles makes it easier to crack a Dragon’s Milk anytime. New Holland also packages the potent stout in 19.2-ounce cans that might sell for as little as \$4 at grocery stores, helping Dragon’s Milk compete for instant-gratification occasions that might be reserved for double IPAs.

“It’s a premium product at an affordable price with a large portion and a high ABV, and that makes it really resonate,” Maddux says. “Premium and potent are obviously important, and when people perceive something to be a premium product, they’ll continue to spend their dollars.”

Producing excellent beer is no longer a recipe for success alone. Packaging beer in formats that deliver palatable price points is now essential. During a recent trip to a grocery store in Columbus, Ohio, I discovered two new displays filled with seven-ounce bottles of Corona and Modelo, the latter priced at five for \$5—a pretty attractive number, especially if a standard six-pack of 12-ounce bottles breaks the budget.

At Goose Island, Ahsmann has seen Bourbon County Brand Original Stout in most every format. The imperial stout debuted in the early 1990s on draft, before the brewery began packaging it in 12-ounce bottles around 2005. The brewery later embraced 22-ounce bottles, before creating the 16.9-ounce bottle.

But now, the 10-ounce bottle will hopefully usher in a new era for Bourbon County, one where it's less trying to get trial, perhaps opening up the stout to BBQs, parties or just a quiet Tuesday night. With a smaller bottle, "Bourbon County can play in that space."

By Joshua Bernstein

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