



The rise of the can

Keith's colleague at Brewlab, Brian Yorston, offers his personal view on the rise of canning based on his own experience...

"Over the last few years, I have reflected on the rise of craft canning. This article is my personal thoughts on the subject as an outsider to craft canning.

My experience of canning stems from my days at Vaux and has carried on over the different jobs I have had. At Vaux, on the site of old brewery workers houses, a purpose-built canning line was built in the 1980's. This line was rated at 1,000 cans per minute using a tunnel pasteuriser. Just imagine filling at a rate of 264hl per hour in a 24-hour operation? Imagine the infrastructure to brew, ferment, condition and filter at such a rate. We at that time had a contract to supply Tesco so our incessant Christmas "campaign" started in August and stopped at the beginning of December. Warehouses throughout the region were full of Norseman lager ready for the deluge the supermarkets required. All of this sounds great but we were told that we made more profit from one vehicle to our pubs than from 27 to Tesco. All of this work was stressful for us all, with very little reward.

I also looked after contract canning at Wadworth and again it was a lot of work for very little reward. Organising can runs required purchasing 100,000's of cans as a minimum order and arranging a minimum of 360 barrels to be filtered and tanked to the canner.

So, it was against this background that I reflected on the rise of craft canning. My conclusions can be put into three categories being technology, design and revenue.

Firstly technology. It is evident that you don't need a huge canning operation to fill cans.

Small canning and can seamer machines have found their way from the USA and have been adopted by the craft brewer to fill small volumes. This meant canning can be done for a relatively modest investment. Even if you cannot afford the cost of setting up a canning line, mobile canning operators are able to come to your brewery. I saw such an operation a few weeks ago and was interested in videoing this to show to our students. The problem of can supply has to a degree been solved by labelling plain cans. I have visited a major can manufacture in north Wales and because of the scale of the operation I can understand why they simply cannot do craft size runs of pre-printed cans. Having plain cans labelled off site by specialist means a small run of cans are printed to suit a particular filling run.

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This will reduce both cost and storage. Empty cans can take up a great deal of storage. It is interesting that Brewdog have now installed a KHS can labeller at their Ellon site so that they can produce "small" bespoke product lines very quickly. Look how quickly they managed to produce their Barnard Castle Eye Test beer not long after Dominic Cummings visit to the town came out as news.

The second aspect of craft cans is the design. The label on a glass bottle can be a little boring but the craft canners have used the full surface area of the can to produce clever, innovative designs. Look at a supermarket shelf for craft cans and you will see how attractive to the customer the cans are.

Controversially - the can is opaque so that some craft brewers get away with using cloudy unfiltered beer. In a glass bottle the hazy



Brian Yorston

beer may put some customers off the initial purchase. With a can once the purchase has been made the beer will be drunk even when hazy. This has enabled the customer to realise that cloudy beer will certainly do you no harm.

The final aspect of the can is revenue. Just look at the cost per litre of the craft can in your supermarket and you will find there is a premium for the can beer. In a survey a few years ago, for a beer of the same abv a craft can was 56% more expensive than a bottle. It is interesting that with the lockdown many brewers have begun to sell their beer direct to the customer and at a good premium. As an example, the cans I saw being filled a few weeks ago were on that brewer's web site being sold for £5 each. The Brewdog eye test beer will set you back over £2 per 330 ml. To me this is great that finally after selling cheap "pile them high" beer to Tesco in the 1980's, brewers through the medium of direct sale of can beer are beginning to get a better margin for their work. Let's hope this revolution for craft cans continues and prospers the brewing trade as we certainly need it."