

BEER BUZZ:

SIZE MATTERS

by Joey Williams

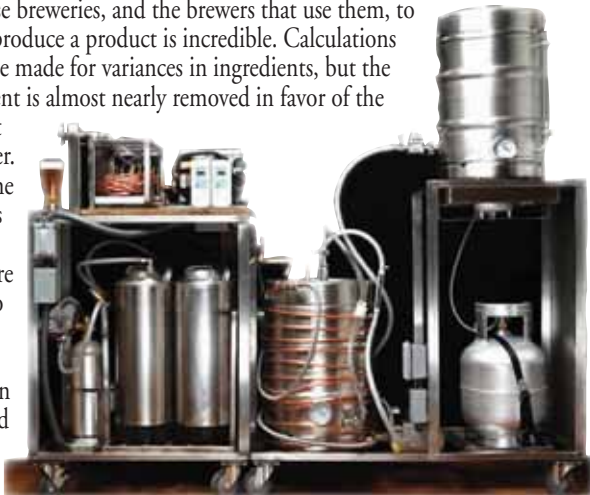


The idea of handcrafting a product suggests tiny imperfections and differences between production runs that also suggests a person was involved. Human beings aren't as consistent as machines, but there is an idea that human hands make a superior product. I believe it, especially with beer. There is something about the human interaction in the process that makes for a more enjoyable product. It's that elusive "X factor". Maybe it's love, passion or some other human trait making its way into the final product, but there's just something desirable about handcrafted products. Size, to some extent, seems to be the other end of the balance. Is it possible to grow significantly in size without compromising some on craftsmanship?

At the heart of the debate is consistency. Consistency in brewing is ensuring that the flaws and fluctuations from batch to batch with regards to ingredient specifications, fermentation details and the human element aren't noticeable to the end consumer. It's important for a brewery to establish a brand and it's hard to become a recognizable brand with a continually changing product. So, the brewer has to make calculations to compensate for varying sugar contents in their malt, different oil and acid contents in hops and try to coax the yeast, a living organism, to do what it's supposed to the same way every time. The brewer's ability to achieve this consistency is one of their greatest achievements. If we, as the consumer, do not notice these constant changes, then the brewer is successfully doing his or her job.

As a brewery gets bigger, more of the inconsistencies in ingredients and processes become a problem and the importance of a consistent product becomes even more pressing. Growing in size means covering more area with more product. Generally, the brewery is putting beer into more distribution houses, retail stores and bars. All of these places reflect a new set of hands and a new environment where the smallest of inconsistencies can be magnified by mishandling or mistreatment of the beer.

As size grows, it's important to minimize the level of fluctuation from batch to batch. Many national craft breweries have built or upgraded to state of the art mechanized "push button" breweries. These brewhouses have the ability to make the malt and hop additions at all the necessary times, and maintain all of the vital temperatures throughout the process. Some facilities can even measure the live yeast during fermentation, down to each individual cell. The ability of these breweries, and the brewers that use them, to consistently produce a product is incredible. Calculations still have to be made for variances in ingredients, but the human element is almost nearly removed in favor of the precision that machines offer. The role of the brewer in this case is much more to ensure that things go according to how they are supposed to in the automated brew session.



Often times the end result, the beer in your glass, benefits from this factory-style brewing. However, other procedures fall prey to logistical problems resulting from size. Small breweries often bottle-condition their beers because of the natural, old-world feel and flavor. Bottle-conditioning involves dosing beer, that has completed fermentation, with some form of sugar so that yeast in the bottle will create the desired CO₂. This is also sometimes referred to as a secondary or bottle-fermentation. The problem with bottle-conditioning is that it takes time, usually weeks or months, and it's not fool proof. Occasionally, a beer fails to condition properly in the bottle and has less or more CO₂ than was desired. This varying level of carbonation can dramatically affect the enjoyment of a beer.

The more beer that a brewery produces, the more space is needed to store beers that are refermenting in the bottle. Often times a brewery will reach a point that bottle-conditioning all of their beers is no longer possible or practical and they will begin force-carbonating their beers. Force-carbonating involves dissolving a desired amount of CO₂ into beer that is ready to be packaged. This process is much more reliable, can be measured and doesn't take the time or space that bottle-conditioning does.

There is no right or wrong when it comes to a brewery's approach to making their product. What is most important is the end result, the beer, and how it is enjoyed by the consumer. Many brewers have found their niche making a few thousands barrels a year for their region with all the slight fluctuations of a handcrafted operation. A handful of breweries have broken into the realm of a million barrels or more produced a year with laser-like precision and quality control. It would be hard to argue that what the bigger brewers achieve in the glass is any different than what the smaller brewers are putting out there. What it comes down to is personal preference. In an industry constantly rooting for the underdog, size is a constant concern for brewers and beer enthusiasts alike. How big is "too big"? How can a craft brewer retain a level of craftsmanship on such a large scale, and what gets lost in the process? This is a topic that is incredibly interesting to me and one that I'm interested in hearing others' opinions on. ☺

If you have an opinion, I'd like to hear it.

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