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## Can do - craft-beer makers kicking glass, going metal

By Rick Nichols  
Inquirer Columnist

If there was one reliable signal of a beer's seriousness and pedigree, not to mention cost, it could usually be spotted in the packaging: Odd-shaped bottle? Good. Ceramic-looking bottle with noir Euro-graphic? Better. Wire basket, cork stopper and monastic shield? Be still, my beating heart.

So one has a certain sympathy for the befuddlement that has descended on Monk's Cafe, the mecca for Belgian and craft brews, at 16th and Spruce Streets.

Monk's was the first local joint to lift a glass to a whole new galaxy of beers - Flemish sour ales and smoked beers; fizzy lambics and hazy wheat beers, and the early small-batch lagers from Carol Stoudt, the pioneering (female!) micro-brewer in Adamstown, Pa.

Expectations were raised. Style was elevated. Thus, when you belly up to the venerable bar and order a featured Pike Island Pils, the exquisite, German-style pilsner from Sly Fox, the Phoenixville brewer, there is one thing you are not in any way conditioned for: The stuff, my friend, comes in a can.

You heard that right: Craft beer(s) in a can.

Felicia, the backroom bartender at Monk's, has seen the reaction: "You slap it down on the bar, and they look surprised." Like the first time you order fine wine at a white-tablecloth place, and the waiter unscrews the cap at the table.

I'd had advance notice the other night. Co-owner Tom Peters invited me to a dinner with Lucy Saunders, the charming beer maven and cookbook author (her latest is the self-published *Grilling with Beer*, \$20) from Milwaukee: "We'll have picnic beers, all craft beers in cans," he warned brightly.

Even so, I was taken aback as hip-looking can (21st Amendment's clean Waltermelon Wheat) after soft-green can (Butternuts Heinnieweisse) emerged from the ice. I didn't even pour it right. Saunders grabbed the first can out of my hand as I slid its contents down the side of my glass. Pour down the middle, she instructed, the better to release the eager carbonation.

I looked for bottle snobs. Couldn't find any. At least, not this night: What's up with cans? I asked George Hummel, the un-shy beer writer: "Better than bottles," he said. I asked



AKIRA SUWA / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Why does Monk's Cafe, famous for craft brews, offer pedigreed beer in cans? Well, for starters, they easily thwart the twin enemies of ultraviolet light and air. They chill faster, too.

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- In my mouth

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Saunders: "They're impervious to ultraviolet light and air, the two enemies of beer."

Shaun O'Sullivan, the owner of 21st Amendment, the San Francisco brewpub, was defiant: "We've got to take this packaging back from the big brewers!"

Therein, of course, lies the image problem; we've been conditioned, Saunders offered, to expect the worst from a can - airy, insipid suds. But this ain't the can's fault, it turns out.

Indeed, the latter-day beer can is lined with polymer film, mooting the metallic-taste problem once associated with cans' welded seams. In the green department, it scores well, too: It's lighter to transport, takes less energy to chill, recycles like a charm. (Doesn't cut feet.)

Chris Fetfatzes at Bella Vista Distributors, 11th and Fitzwater Streets, which stocks cans of Sly Fox's summery weisse beer along with the Pikeland Pils and Dale's Pale Ale, is a convert, too: He thinks cans keep temperature more stable. (The Foodery, at 10th and Pine and at Second and Poplar, also carries craft beer six-packs.)

So what took so long? One, says Peters, the cost of putting a new canning line in a craft brewery has become more affordable. (They run about a third the \$250,000 price of a new bottling line, and there's no need to add labels.) Second, can suppliers, who required minimum orders in the millions, are now offering smaller batches - in the tens of thousands - to small-batch brewers.

Opportunity knocks: Craft beer poised to go mobile, competing with the big boys on their own turf (and surf). Can the day be far off when beer-can chicken gets uppity, demanding its due on the city's tonier menus?

#### Monk's Cafe

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