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DRINK | THE SIPPING NEWS

Craft beer in a can?

'Blue-collar' packaging gains ground

By Greg Kitsock

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Ten years ago I asked one of the movers and shakers of the craft beer business if he planned to can his beers. "Cans are for baked beans, not fine beverages," he scoffed.

At issue was not so much the integrity of the container as its image. Beer cans have been around since 1935 and today cradle almost half the beer consumed in this country. But the can has been largely unable to shed its blue-collar aura.

But a few years ago a Canadian firm, Cask Brewing Systems Inc., marketed a canning machine that was small enough and inexpensive enough to interest microbrewers.

In 2002 a Colorado brew pub named Oskar Blues became the first U.S. operation to buy Cask's machine. "The original intent was to promote the brew pub" by selling the canned beer locally as a marketing tool, said Marty Jones, a company spokesman.

But sales of Dale's Pale Ale in bright red, blue and silver 12-ounce cans took off. In 2002, Oskar Blues sold 700 barrels of beer; in 2007 it expects to sell 14,000 barrels, about 80 percent of that outside the pub. Its cans are sold in 15 states (not Kentucky or Indiana).

Oskar Blues was not the first small brewery to try cans, Jones says. Earlier, a few craft brewers had started renting bigger breweries' facilities to can their own beer, "but these were typically more mainstream styles," he says. (Brooklyn Brewery, for example, offers its Brooklyn Lager in cans, but not its East India Pale Ale or Black Chocolate Stout.)

There is nothing mainstream about Dale's Pale Ale. Punch in the top and the familiar "psssssst!" is followed by the citrus-and-pine-needle aroma of Pacific Northwest hops.

Brewers measure the bitterness of beer using a system of international bitterness units, or IBUs. Budweiser measures about 12 IBUs; Sierra Nevada Pale Ale registers 37; Dale's Pale Ale clocks in at 65.

Cask Brewing Systems has about 25 other clients in this country, but most are tiny brew pubs and microbreweries that don't sell outside their immediate region. So European breweries have stepped in to fill the demand for better beer in cans. In 1992 Guinness introduced its "widget" can in America. When the can is opened, compressed nitrogen roils the beer to simulate the creamy head of a draft stout.

You can buy three fine English pale ales in tall cans: the caramely Abbott Ale (16.9 ounces), the creamy Old Speckled Hen (14.9 ounces), and the hoppier Ruddles County English Pub Ale (16.9 ounces), all from Greene King in Suffolk, England. The Czech classic Pilsner Urquell comes in similar containers, as does the Netherlands' Oranjeboom, a slightly heftier alternative to Heineken. Wittekerke, a coriander- and orange peel-spiced ale from Belgium's Bavik Brewery, has sporadically appeared here in six-packs of azure-colored 11.2-ounce cans.

Why choose cans when there are so many fine bottled selections? They're lighter and more compact than glass. They chill faster. They're welcome at marinas, beaches, golf courses and other places where broken bottles present problems. They're easily recyclable.

The biggest obstacle to selling craft beer in cans, Jones says, is the perception that the beer will taste metallic. Oskar Blues owner Dale Katechis says that's a myth. "The modern-day aluminum can and its lid are lined with a water-based

coating that prevents beer and metal from ever touching," his Web site says.

One skeptic is Jim Koch, president of the Boston Beer Co., which bottles its Samuel Adams beers. Koch claims that tiny perforations in a can's ultra-thin lining can allow the beer to come in contact with the metal, compromising the flavor over time.

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