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Craft beers are making mark not by volume but by flavors

By Travis E. Poling
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Here are a few descriptively labeled beers for your consideration: Oak-aged imperial stout, double IPA, chocolate oatmeal stout, coffee porter, maple ale, spruce ale and triple dunkel weizen.

If any one of those has you excited, you can thank a few thousand men and women who are passionate about a good brew and not settling for the same old thing.

When the craft brewers of the United States finished their mastery of the classic brews of Europe -- which were plenty different to American palates -- they turned their attention to turning those classics on their heads.

The new face of the second renaissance of craft brewing is made up of people ranging from engineers to bakers, former executives to musicians. Making beer in America is about nonconforming.

Trading up

"Craft beers are hot," says Julia Herz, director of craft beer marketing for the Brewers Association. "It's not just a trend and a fad because people are demanding flavor in their beer. They're trading up in coffee and cheese and other foods, so why not beer?"

The micro and craft beer segment in America grew 17.8 percent last year, according to data from Information Resources. Wine grew by 10 percent last year and imported beer sales grew by 10.8 percent over 2005. Overall, mass-produced beer was fairly flat at 2.4 percent growth.

Home brewers began learning classic European brewing styles in the 1980s, and a small cadre launched microbreweries and brewpubs. By the early 1990s, the business got hot and many a mediocre brew started coming from what was considered the craft-brewing scene.

Financial pressures sank many of them, but those that hung in and kept challenging the taste buds of America paved the way for a more stable resurgence.

There are almost 1,400 small breweries in the United States, producing 6.7 million barrels of lagers and ales in 2006. Most are very small, making fewer than 15,000 barrels a year.

"America's craft brewers are better than ever," Herz says.

That technical proficiency is spurring brewers to get creative with their craft even as they make solid American versions of classic German, English and Belgian beer styles.

"Beer enthusiasts are embracing these stronger, more adventurous beers," says Sam Calagione,

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founder and head brewer of Dogfish Head Brewing Co. in Delaware. "Word of mouth keeps people changing tastes and learning."

Calagione's brews, primarily known for an alcohol content ranging from 9 percent to 20 percent, are experiments in big flavors and ingredients.

With Chateau Jiahu, he uses a Chinese beer recipe thousands of years old that brings honey, grapes and Hawthorne fruit into the mix.

The newest creation is Red & White, an ale with a mostly wheat malt, pinot noir juice from Oregon and orange peel and coriander in the boil. Aging in pinot noir barrels and white virgin oak staves round out this blending of a classic Belgian style, the bounty of West Coast vineyards and craft brewing creativity.

Vinnie Cilurzo, founder of Russian River Brewing Co. of California, grew up in the winemaking business but pursued his love of brewing. His Temptation ale uses French Oak wine barrels for aging.

Coffee flavor

Real Ale Brewing Co. in Blanco, Texas, makes a popular fall seasonal coffee porter.

Calagione remembers his first experimentations with alternative ingredients and wood aging in the early 1990s when most folks didn't know what to expect from the new crop of American brewers.

One customer wrote on the comment card after trying an Immort Ale, "It tastes like wood, but it got me [expletive] up."

"That's not what were going for," Calagione says, "but people are really starting to seek out new flavors."

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