

Cask in the Light

Unpasteurized and unfiltered, cask beers are finding fans

BY JESSICA MERRILL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STACY ZARIN

Step into any sophisticated beer bar these days and there's a good chance you'll find cask beer on tap. Cask-conditioned beer is the latest trend to hit the American craft brewing industry, and it is all about getting back to basics with unprocessed beers made the way they were hundreds of years ago.

Cask beer is unpasteurized, unfiltered and naturally carbonated by yeast during a secondary fermentation in the cask—rather than by the addition of carbon dioxide, as is the case with most brews. Cask beer is gaining momentum among beer aficionados for being the most unadulterated form of brewing.

As Dogfish Head founder and president Sam Calagione puts it, "It's the equivalent of the raw food movement."

Cask beer has been popular in England for years, but it has taken American palates longer to warm to the trend—literally. Cask beer is served at around 52 degrees, which while still cool is warmer than the icy temperature at which most American brews are served (generally 37 to 40 degrees). That, combined with the fine carbonation of cask beer, has fueled a misperception that cask beer is warm and flat. Not so, as long as the beer is properly cared for. The higher temperature allows the subtle flavors and aromatics of the beer to shine through. As more beer drinkers are sampling and liking

cask beer, more breweries are producing it and more bars are showcasing it.

"I call it the flavor effect," says Alex Hall, a British beer consultant in Manhattan who organizes cask beer festivals in the city to help spread the word. "When people try it, they like it and they want to try more of it."

But making cask beer is more labor intensive than producing processed beer, and so is maintaining and serving it.

"Our cask beers are made entirely by hand," says Garrett Oliver, brew master at Brooklyn Brewery, which produces a range of limited-release cask brews, including Brooklyn Best Bitter. For most beers, the brewery can process 85 kegs in two and a half hours on an automated machine, but it makes only a dozen casks in that time.

"I'm sure we lose money on every cask we sell," Oliver says. "The only reason to do it is for the art form."

"It's definitely a labor of love," adds Calagione, whose Delaware brewery produces just 120 casks every three months but has plans to ramp up production soon.

Cask beer requires coddling on the part of the bar master, too. Casks must be appropriately positioned to allow the yeasts to settle, and they must sit for several days so the beer will "drop bright," or pour completely clear (cask beer should never be hazy).



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This page: Churchkey beverage director Greg Engert mans his station. Opposite page: The D.C. beer bar's period décor features chandeliers, velvet tufted banquets and flock wallpaper.