

Michigan's Craft Sessions

By Brad Probert

If you visit the **Paw Paw Brewing Company**, you'll notice they distinctly call out their session ales on the beer menu - and those make up half or more of their offerings. Paw Paw Brewer Trevor Klimek notes, "We live in a rural area, which means people typically have to drive home from the pub. We want to make sure they get home safe, but can still enjoy a beer here." That's a sentiment I think everyone can live with.

Yet modern craft beer appears to have taken us in the opposite direction. This is no fault of our brewers; it's simply the reflection of consumer demand.

Session ales can be found quite easily and in large variety in pubs in the UK. The pub life lends itself well to session ales. Trips to local pubs are a much more regular occurrence, where the standard size vessel is an Imperial Pint (19.2 oz.). So enjoying more than one high ABV ale on a regular basis makes things like getting home or even getting into work the next day more challenging. Back in the early days of WWI, the Defense of the Realm Act was passed which not only prohibited customers from buying a round of drinks in the pub, but also decreased the ABV of English ales. Even after the war, the graduated tax based on a beer's ABV has remained. There is a linear tax rate for "General Beer" based on ABV, but beers above 7.5% ABV pay at a 20% higher rate. Beer that squeaks in at 2.8% or lower, are charged half the duty rate of General Beer.

In the U.S., we don't have this tax phenomenon influencing brewer recipes. As we've been going through our craft beer evolution, it seems a lot of the growth and hype has been around high alcohol beers trying to distance themselves from the mass-market lagers. As hopheads can attest, you often find the heavily hopped IPAs go hand-in-hand with lots of malt to balance all of that hop flavor. I love a lot of Imperial IPAs, but there are times when I really can't deal with the "ABV baggage" that comes with it. Whether it's getting up for work early the next day, trying to not fall asleep in the corner booth during a night out, or more importantly being able to drive home safely- there's a time when you're not impressed by the double digit alcohol percentage. Luckily, there's a new trend emerging in



craft beer, Session IPA.

In early 2011, **North Peak** introduced Wanderer, a Session IPA (4.2% ABV), initially as a seasonal beer, but it quickly transitioned into a year-round beer. In 2013, around the same time North Peak moved brewing operations to Dexter, MI, they also hired John Walsh to be their head brewer. Charles Psenka (Chief Liaison, Northern United Brewing) noted, "John made tweaks to the North Peak recipes as he dialed in the beers in the new facility." Charles also noted that at GABF, Wanderer was their hit of the show, with people continually looking for more.



Mike Stevens (CEO, **Founders**) reiterated the Founders mantra "Made for us" when describing how they came up with the concept for All Day IPA. They wanted a great tasting beer that they could enjoy while working out on the road on sales or marketing events- and so hatched the idea. They started experimenting 4 years ago, and after about 6-8 major tweaks in the recipe, they ended up with something they liked in 2012. Mike said that All Day was "the most difficult and sophisticated beer we've ever made." They introduced it into a limited number of markets and soon after couldn't keep up with demand there. After they went national with it in 2013, within a couple of months it became their #1 volume brand. They did see a dip in their sales of Centennial IPA briefly, but as All Day IPA continued to climb in sales, they found Centennial came back up as well. For 2014, they're projecting All Day IPA will make up 35% of their volume. With a pretty broad port-

folio of beers, their flagship Centennial only made up 25% of their volume, so to reach 35% with All Day IPA shows how big of a hit they expect this to be.

There are other Michigan breweries out there providing options in the hoppy arena. Amongst **Short B.C.'s** dizzying array of seasonal beers, they make room for some low-alcohol IPAs. However, in contrast to Founders' bullish approach to their session IPA, Pauline Knighton (Marketing and PR, Short's) sees a place for their session ales on their rotating seasonal offerings, but doesn't expect it to make their year-round list any time soon. Their 2014 release of Prolonged Enjoyment (3.2% IPA) is planned to hit shelves in May, but once the allotment they brewed is gone, it's gone until next year. Other Michigan options include **Odd Side Ales** Simcoe Sensation (4.5% IPA), **Atwater** Grand Circus (4.2% IPA), and **Right Brain** Willpower (4.2% Pale Ale).

Taking low alcohol to its limit and underscoring the diversity in Michigan's beer offerings, we even an NA option out there. Schmozh initially introduced their "120" pale ale in May 2010. It was well received, but it was being produced at a cost higher than what it was selling for, so they discontinued it in June 2012. After substantial capital investment, they brought it back to the market in September 2013 and now sell it without losing money on each sale. Chas Thompson (Beer Engineer, Schmozh) notes an interesting trend they've seen: "For the most part the consumers of 120 are exclusive NA. They don't cross back and forth. We thought there would be a market there for a lunch time NA beer for regular beer drinkers, but it has not emerged."

To get a feel for what these beer options mean to your sobriety, I'll crunch some numbers using a BAC calculator. Inputting a 180 lb. Male, drinking a 4.7% All-Day IPA, you could have 4 beers over a 2-hour period and be at a BAC of 0.056%. Now if you instead had 4 Centennial IPAs at 7.2%, your BAC would be at 0.103%. That's a big difference. To keep tabs on your buzz and make responsible choices, there are numerous BAC apps for your smartphone out there. They can be a bit tedious to mess around with at times, but a good customizable one (I use Alcodroid) can help you make more informed choices than just the self-assessment, "I think I'm OK."

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