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Next Trends: Beer Predictions from a Flavor Scientist

Donna Wamsley of Seattle-based SoRSE Technology—a specialist in figuring out how to get flavors into our foods and drinks—talks consumer trends and what’s on the horizon for the beer industry.

KATE BERNOT (/AUTHOR/KATE-BERNOT) Mar 22, 2021 - 8 min read



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Sales figures can help show us what styles have been performing well for craft breweries. (Cheat sheet: Nielsen data on the craft segment for the 52 weeks ending in late January show triple-digit sales gains for imperial hazy IPAs, nonalcoholic beers, and light lagers, compared to the previous year.) More elusive are insights into the flavors or ingredients that are most exciting to customers now and in the near future—and thus might help us predict the next trends.

For that sort of insight, we turn to food scientist Donna Wamsley, director of research and analytics for Seattle-based SoRSE Technology (<https://sorsetech.com>). The company creates delivery systems—specifically, water-soluble emulsion technology—for incorporating “difficult” ingredients (such as cannabinoids) into foods and drinks.

Wamsley says that analyzing and predicting future flavor and ingredient trends begins, basically, with listening to what

drinkers want. Then, she takes into account macro factors—such as the pandemic—and how those are shaping consumer needs and behaviors.

Here we look at some of the trends that Wamsley sees shaping the alcoholic-beverage industry now and into the future.

Global Flavors to Soothe Wanderlust

“Right now, everyone’s staying home and reminiscing about when they used to travel,” Wamsley says. “So a big trend right now is ... flavors that are inspired by people traveling.”

She points to flavors such as tropical fruit—an area that brewers can explore with fruit, hops, or combinations thereof—as well as region- or country-specific flavors. In terms of food, this might mean that Hawaiian-style “kalua pork” is more intriguing to consumers, as a flavor, than simply “pork.”

Connecting a flavor or ingredient to its place of origin is a way to signal that global sensibility to drinkers: Think Madagascar vanilla, Barbados rum barrels, or Mexican piloncillo sugar.

Familiar Ingredients Meet the Exotic

Beverage producers need to walk a fine line with new and novel ingredients, Wamsley says. Especially as the pandemic continues, and with store shoppers making purchase decisions more quickly than ever, drinkers need to have a baseline understanding of what a beer or other product will taste like. They want to know the drink’s basic flavor category—tart, sweet, fruity, savory, etc.—so it’s important to communicate that baseline understanding via the packaging.

One way to make unfamiliar flavors more attractive, she says, is to pair that flavor with something known. She offers examples such as dragon fruit and grapefruit, or hibiscus and blood orange, or even durian and pineapple.

“You want people to have an expectation of what a flavor will taste like but also to offer that kind of novelty and exotic factor,” she says. “Definitely pairing a popular, known flavor with something that’s not as well-known is a way to have people try new flavors and trends.”

Functional & Low-Calorie Ingredients

Across food and drink categories, people are increasingly interested in maximizing the benefits (such as vitamins and adaptogens) of what they consume, while reducing the perceived negatives (such as calories). While the idea of an alcoholic drink providing health benefits might seem counterintuitive, Wamsley says that consumers are increasingly expecting that option.

“There’s a big portion of consumers [who] are now realizing that their food can have additional functional ingredients and still be delicious,” she says. “I think the next trend with the beer industry will be to add some of those functional ingredients—to have a delicious beverage, but still have it be functional.”

She points to the popularity of hard seltzers as proof of this. They generally have fewer calories than beer, and some even boast the inclusion of vitamin C. Nonalcoholic hop water is also a trend she’s watching; it delivers craft beer’s most popular flavor, but without calories.

She also singles out mushrooms and mushroom powder as trending, functional ingredients that beer makers may want to watch. (To those who think beer with mushrooms sounds gross, consider how Dogfish Head has incorporated “healthy” ingredients including quinoa, elderberry, and black lime into beers, or how Ska brews a beer called Pink Vapor Stew with beets, carrots, ginger, and apples.)

CBD Drinks Go Mainstream

Whether alcoholic or not, beverages made with cannabinoids including CBD and THC are poised to grow as infusion technology and consumer awareness improves. Wamsley says that for years, cannabinoids were the “holy grail” ingredient in food and beverage, but the technology to make those compounds not just water-soluble but consistent was still developing.

Cannabinoids don’t *like* being in liquids, she says—so while they can be made water-soluble, producing a CBD or THC drink that tastes the same from first sip to last is still a challenge. The technology is evolving, though, and so are consumer attitudes.

“Word of mouth is pretty key in the cannabinoid space,” Wamsley says. She points to celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Cameron Diaz talking about cannabinoids, which normalizes the category and sets up consumer expectations. “More people are curious and doing their own research. Then they’re thinking, ‘Oh, CBD is supposed to relax me. It’s supposed to be an anti-inflammatory.’ Let’s give it a try.”

While playing in the cannabinoid space might not be feasible for smaller breweries yet, it’s an emerging drink category that Wamsley expects to continue to grow.

Familiar Hop Flavors, Reintroduced

The improving technology around delivering cannabinoids in beverages seems to mirror the beer industry's innovations in hop-flavor extraction and infusion. As scientists have learned more about hops' compounds and how to isolate them, it's changed the way brewers impart hops into beer. Hop oils, frozen pellets, and extracts all continue to deliver a familiar beer ingredient in new and different forms, unlocking new flavors along the way.

Wamsley expects this to continue in the brewing industry. As we've seen with high-density hop charges (HDHC) and cryogenics, it's a way for breweries to differentiate their product and introduce drinkers to kaleidoscopic hop flavors. "Maybe it's offering a different flavor profile, even though it's the same hop variety that drinkers are completely used to, but they're getting a different nuance because it's extracted differently."

This toes that line, mentioned earlier by Wamsley, between the familiar and the exotic. New hop technology will likely continue to offer breweries a tool with which to say, "Sure, you've tasted Nelson Sauvin before. But you've never had it taste like *this*."

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