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U.S. breweries revive mid-strength beer to chase drinkers seeking moderation

Brewers are betting that 4% to 5% beers can fill the gap between light lagers and fast-growing non-alcoholic options.

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U.S. breweries are again pushing mid-strength beer, a segment generally defined at about 4% to 5% alcohol by volume, as they look for growth between traditional light beer and the fast-rising non-alcoholic category.

The shift reflects a new turn in the beer market after years in which many American craft brewers favored stronger styles. Joshua M. Bernstein, writing in SevenFifty Daily, said that about 15 years ago brewers split in two directions, with some going lower in alcohol while others moved higher. He pointed to Founders All Day IPA, bottled at 4.7% ABV, as a key product in that change, saying it helped turn IPA into a more casual daytime drink and effectively created the session IPA category in the United States. He said it remains the brewery's best-selling beer.

Brewers now appear to be revisiting that middle ground as moderation becomes a stronger consumer theme. Chuck Buckingham, chief marketing officer at Mahou, said the "pendulum feels like it's swinging even further now," describing renewed interest in lower-alcohol styles.

Bernstein said mid-strength beer has long been central to drinking culture in countries including the United Kingdom, Scandinavia and Australia, where governments encourage lower-alcohol production by taxing stronger beers more heavily. He cited Australia's top-selling beer, Great Northern Super Crisp, a 3.5% ABV lager, and noted that milds and bitters with moderate alcohol levels remain staples in British pubs.

That tax structure abroad could matter for the wider drinks business as producers weigh how regulation shapes demand. In the United States, a stronger move toward beers in the 4% to 5% range could eventually influence brewery portfolios and retail shelf space if moderate-drinking habits continue to expand.

Bernstein said U.S. craft brewers in the 2010s embraced extremes of flavor and alcohol as a way to stand out and drive sales. Mid-strength beer is now being positioned for drinkers who want to reduce alcohol intake without giving it up entirely. He said American-made mid-strength pilsners and IPAs can still offer more flavor than light lagers while carrying less alcohol.

The category faces a familiar challenge: taste. Bernstein said session IPA lost momentum partly because too many early examples tasted thin or unbalanced. He argued that breweries trying again are working to avoid those mistakes if they want the segment to become durable.

Consumer education is also emerging as a hurdle. Caroline Foulk, who launched Beer Girl Brewing in Laguna Beach, California, in 2024, makes two gluten-reduced lagers at 3.5% ABV. She said the term “mid-strength” does not always connect with drinkers right away and that direct sampling has been the most effective way to build interest.

F.X. Matt Brewing in Utica, New York, entered the segment last spring with Saranac Weekend Warrior, a 3% ABV pilsner, and later added a Weekend Warrior hazy IPA. The beers are now sold in a new low-alcohol section at Wegmans grocery stores. Fred Matt, president of F.X. Matt Brewing, said building demand has required repeated sampling and explanation to shoppers.

Bernstein said the rise of non-alcoholic beer may have helped prepare consumers for this next step by making lower-alcohol choices more visible and acceptable. For breweries trying to find room between full-strength craft beer and alcohol-free products, mid-strength beer is becoming another way to target moderation without abandoning flavor.