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Oktoberfest beers pull shoppers into stores this fall

Retailers say the style reaches casual buyers, lifting sales of pumpkin brews, ciders and other autumn releases.

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Retailers say Oktoberfest beers are again drawing shoppers into stores this fall, helping lift seasonal beer sales and, in some markets, supporting demand for pumpkin brews, ciders and other cold-weather releases.

Store operators in Chicago, North Dakota and western New York say the seasonal style has broad appeal that reaches beyond regular craft beer buyers. They describe Oktoberfest as one of the few fall beer categories that can attract both dedicated enthusiasts and casual shoppers looking for a familiar seasonal option.

At Archer Liquors in Chicago, chief beer officer Randy Wesselhoff said Oktoberfest stands out because it connects with mainstream customers in a way many other specialty beer releases do not. He said even casual beer drinkers are often willing to try the style, despite a beer market that changes quickly and can be difficult for some shoppers to follow.

The style includes traditional German amber marzen lagers and lighter festbier versions, along with a large number of American interpretations. Wesselhoff said that mix gives retailers a wide range of choices while still offering customers a clear seasonal identity. He said the store builds a dedicated shelf display for Oktoberfest beers each year, a sign of the category’s importance in the fall selling season.

Archer Liquors’ top-selling Oktoberfest beer is Ayinger, priced at $4.29 for a 500-milliliter bottle or two for $8. Wesselhoff said the beer is the clear favorite among customers. He added that Samuel Adams, sold at $19 for a 12-pack of 12-ounce bottles, and Spaten, priced at $11 for a six-pack of 12-ounce bottles, are also strong sellers.

In North Dakota, Dustin Mitzel, chief executive of Happy Harry’s Bottle Shops, said Oktoberfest releases are the largest and most sought-after of the beer industry’s four main seasonal release periods. His company operates five stores, three in Fargo and two in Grand Forks, and is carrying about 60 Oktoberfest stock-keeping units in each store this year, about the same level as last year.

Mitzel said the chain has increased its selection of nonalcoholic Oktoberfest beers, reflecting broader growth in alcohol-free products. He said the company’s seasonal merchandising varies by location and by year, partly because Oktoberfest products often arrive in late July and August, overlapping with the end of the summer beer season and complicating display planning. In most cases, the beers are placed within each brand’s cooler set and on floor displays. When space allows, stores also group

Oktoberfest options together in a single section.

Happy Harry’s best-selling German Oktoberfest beers are Hacker-Pschorr and Paulaner, each priced at $19 for a 12-pack of 330-milliliter bottles. Among American entries, Samuel Adams, at $14.97 for a 12-pack of 12-ounce bottles, and Shiner Oktoberfest, at $13.97, lead the category.

Mitzel said Oktoberfest does not stand alone in the company’s fall lineup. The retailer is also carrying about 20 seasonal pumpkin beers and ciders. He said those products help keep the autumn beer set fresh and varied for customers who want more than one style during the season. Among the stronger performers are Samuel Adams Jack-O, priced at $14.97 for a 12-pack of 12-ounce bottles, Southern Tier’s Pumpkin Sampler Pack at $18, and Southern Tier PumQueen Cider at $16 for a four-pack of 16-ounce cans.

Wesselhoff said pumpkin beers remain more polarizing than Oktoberfest beers at Archer Liquors. He said the customer base for pumpkin beer is much smaller and that volume is only about 20% of what the store sells in Oktoberfest beer. Archer’s leading pumpkin brands include Southern Tier Pumking at $15 for a four-pack of 12-ounce bottles, Sam Adams Jacko at $12 for a six-pack of 12-ounce bottles, Brooklyn Post Road at $11, and Schlafly Pumpkin Ale from St. Louis at $14.

In Amherst, a Buffalo suburb, Premier Gourmet president Mark Notarius said Oktoberfest and other fall and winter seasonal beers are important drivers of both customer traffic and total retail sales. He said stores with wider craft assortments can benefit during the fourth quarter because many competitors focus mainly on major national brands, while specialty retailers can offer a larger mix of local breweries and limited seasonal releases from across the United States and overseas.

Premier Gourmet is carrying about 40 Oktoberfest and cooler-weather seasonal beer SKUs this year, roughly in line with last year. The store promotes them through email marketing, social media, in-store displays and tastings. Notarius said those efforts help draw customers into the store and often lead to additional purchases.

Among Premier Gourmet’s top Oktoberfest sellers are Hofbrau Festbier at $14 for a six-pack of 330-milliliter bottles, Thin Man from Buffalo at $13 for a four-pack of 16-ounce cans, and Founders Ultimate Oktoberfest at $15 for a four-pack of 12-ounce beers.

Notarius said stronger Oktoberfest traffic also helps other categories. He said pumpkin beers account for about 33% of the store’s fall seasonal beer sales, led by Southern Tier Pumpking Ale at $14 for a four-pack of 12-ounce bottles. He added that India pale ale sales are holding at least steady and in some cases improving because more shoppers are coming through the store during the fall seasonal push.

Retailers said the timing of the category remains important. Oktoberfest beers hit shelves well before the middle of the fall, and stores use them as a bridge from summer drinking patterns into cooler-weather sales. The beers’ early arrival can create logistical pressure because retailers must clear out warm-weather inventory while making space for new seasonal products. But several store operators said the category is important enough to justify the effort.

Wesselhoff said Oktoberfest has a special place in the annual beer calendar because breweries across the market, from traditional German producers to U.S. craft brewers, all take a turn at the same style. That creates direct comparisons on the shelf and gives customers a chance to trade up, experiment or return to established favorites.

The category’s broad range is also helping retailers manage differences in customer budgets. Imported German beers remain important anchors for authenticity, while domestic brands provide lower price points and familiar names. That combination allows stores to sell to shoppers looking for premium single bottles, multi-pack imports or more affordable American 12-packs.

Mitzel said sales trends so far this season have been encouraging, and he expects Oktoberfest and other fall beers to post gains this year. Notarius said he expects sales of Oktoberfest and other fall seasonal beers at Premier Gourmet to remain relatively steady from last year, while continued store traffic should support pumpkin beers and IPAs through the rest of the season.