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Beer Companies Seize the Lead in U.S. Canned Cocktails

Sales rose 28% in the past year, leaving Diageo and Pernod Ricard racing to catch up

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Canned cocktails in the U.S. are increasingly being made by beer companies rather than traditional liquor producers, a shift that is putting pressure on large spirits groups and changing the competitive balance in one of the fastest-growing parts of the alcohol market.

The Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday, November 4, that brewers have gained ground in ready-to-drink cocktails, leaving companies such as Diageo and Pernod Ricard trying to catch up after largely avoiding the category in recent years. The issue has become more visible as canned mixed drinks move further into mainstream social occasions, including holiday parties and other casual gatherings where convenience matters.

According to the report, the products many consumers bring to events such as Halloween parties are now often made by brewers, not by established distillers. High Noon vodka seltzers were cited as one example of a ready-to-drink cocktail that has helped define the category for shoppers looking for portable, single-serve alcoholic drinks.

The broader commercial signal is clear. In the 52 weeks through October 17, sales by value of ready-to-drink cocktails in the U.S. rose 28%, according to the monitor summary based on the Journal’s reporting. That pace of growth has made the segment too large for major spirits companies to ignore, especially after they chose not to lean

into canned cocktails as aggressively as some beer rivals did.

For Diageo, which owns brands including Casamigos, and for Pernod Ricard, the challenge is not only about consumer demand. It is also about how the structure of the business changes when alcohol is sold in cans rather than bottles. Companies that built their strength around spirits labels, bar culture and full-size packaged liquor are facing a category that depends heavily on convenience, portability and a different shelf presence at retail.

That matters across the drinks industry because the rise of canned cocktails could push spirits producers to review manufacturing formats, canning capacity, logistics and distribution networks. Beer companies generally entered the segment with experience in large-scale can production and established systems for moving packaged drinks through stores. For liquor groups, expanding in the format may require new investments and partnerships, as well as changes in how products are marketed and delivered.

The shift also shows how category lines in alcohol are becoming less rigid. A ready-to-drink cocktail may be positioned as a spirits-based drink, but the company best equipped to make and distribute it at scale may be a brewer. That creates a competitive problem for distillers that once had stronger control over cocktail branding but less urgency around single-serve packaging.

The Journal said the trend is not fading and that Diageo and Pernod Ricard are now scrambling to recover lost ground. That suggests the current battle is no longer about whether canned cocktails are a temporary consumer fad. Instead, it is about which companies can respond fastest to a format that has already built meaningful scale in the U.S. market.

For the beverage sector, the development could have effects beyond spirits. Brewers that succeed in ready-to-drink cocktails may gain a new source of growth at a time when traditional beer portfolios face intense competition from other alcohol categories. Wine and spirits producers, meanwhile, may need to decide whether to defend premium bottled products, expand convenience-led packaged offerings, or try to do both without weakening their brand positioning.

The competitive pressure is likely to be strongest for large multinational distillers because they have both the most to lose and the most resources to invest. If the canned-cocktail segment continues to expand at anything close to its recent pace, the companies that hesitated may have to move quickly to avoid giving brewers a lasting advantage in a category that sits between beer, spirits and flavored malt beverages.

What began as a packaging and convenience trend is becoming a broader test of strategy in alcohol. Beer companies moved faster into canned cocktails, and major liquor groups are now trying to narrow the gap in a market that consumers have already shown they are willing to keep buying.