

GLUTEN-FREE: BEER'S NEW GROWTH MARKET



The increasing demand for more gluten-free beers has seen microbreweries look at different methods in their beer production to meet demand. Microbrew talked with some of those involved in the early stages of gluten-free production

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Giselle Dye, Bellfield Brewery

Gluten-free beer has become increasingly popular with a fourfold rise in the number of people being diagnosed with coeliac disease or gluten-intolerance and the trend towards a healthier lifestyle choice.

This has been reflected in the launch of more gluten-free beers and breweries specialising in gluten-free than before, with the market expected to grow by more than 13.5% between now and 2022, according to industry experts.

To produce gluten-free beer, brewers have two options. They can either replace the barley used in the brewing process with alternative gluten-free grains such as buckwheat and sorghum or add an enzyme that breaks down the barley’s protein strands, thereby reducing its gluten level.

Greene King has led the way in innovation with the launch of gluten-free versions of two of its most popular beers, Greene King IPA (3.6% ABV) and Old Speckled Hen (5% ABV) in January 2017. But it’s not just the UK: global brands are getting in on the act too with Carlsberg launching San Miguel Gluten Free (5.4% ABV) last September and Coors also releasing a gluten-free version.

The problem in the past had been a limited range of gluten-free beers and trying to produce a full and balanced taste that is often lost from the traditional brewing process. But given the increased interest in free-from products and a proliferation of new offerings, now there is a beer for almost every occasion, from lagers to porters; even Tennents, the most laddish of Scottish lagers, has rolled out its own version.

The gluten-free craze has extended to trendy bars and pubs with 16% of London craft beer venues stocking gluten-free, according to Conviviality. It’s also stocked on the shelves at Marks & Spencer’s (M&S), Waitrose and Asda, as well as Selfridges and Harvey Nichols.

Here, some of the early pioneers in gluten-free beer talk about their business, their brewing processes and how they are making their mark in this fast-growing and competitive industry.

100% gluten-free

One of the leading gluten-free microbreweries is Bellfield Brewery in Edinburgh, which makes the award-winning Bohemian Pilsner (4.5% ABV) and Lawless Village IPA (4.5% ABV).

The microbrewery, which is run by its four founders Giselle Dye, Kieran Middleton and Alistair and Marie Brown, claims to be the UK’s first dedicated gluten-free brewery following its launch in March 2016 after a successful crowdfunding campaign.

The owners, two of whom are coeliac, decided to start the brewery because of the lack of tasty gluten-free beer in the UK. Demand was also driven by the 15% of the UK population who have decided to cut gluten out of their diet, according to market research company Mintel.

“We’ve developed our own process for removing the gluten, naturally,” said Dye. “We also ensure a full and balanced taste and flavour by using the best ingredients available to us and through extensive trial and error.”

Dye said that every recipe goes through rigorous tests to ensure it meets required standards and only then is it certified gluten-free by Coeliac UK. Recently the brewery has also been trialling a new Australian low-gluten Kebari barley; a variety that has taken 13 years to develop, she added.

The brewery produces around 1,500 hectolitres (hl) of beer per year, supplying Morrisons, as well as independent bottle shops, bars and restaurants. Now it is targeting the international market.

“We already know from our first year in business that there is considerable demand for our products in the UK and beyond,” said director Marie Brown. “We’ve already delivered on our ambition to produce beer that stands up to anything in the market and we’ve secured listings with many of the leading food and drink distributors and wholesalers in the UK. We will now invest to grow our sales and operational team to build on the opportunity and grow our range of beers.”

“ Our challenge is maintaining that point of difference because the price differential compared with enzyme-based products is huge ”

Steve Magnall,
St Peter's Brewery



St Peter's Brewery uses sorghum which is believed to be better for coeliacs



Chance discovery: Andy Hepworth

Another brewery at the cutting edge of gluten-free is St Peter's Brewery in Suffolk. The brewery, which exports mainly to the US and Canada, as well as having a national listing in Tesco, has been making gluten-free beer for about ten years, including its G-Free (4.2% ABV) and Dark G-Free (3.9% ABV).

“The main difference between our gluten-free and most of the market is that we use sorghum, a 100% gluten-free product rather than enzymes used to reduce the gluten level,” said MD Steve Magnall. “Our challenge is maintaining that point of difference because the price differential compared with enzyme-based products is huge.”

Magnall added: “The enzyme-based approach has opened up the market massively. But if you can do a truly gluten-free beer that's not full of enzymes that's a better product for coeliacs.”

It was only after carrying out a risk assessment for packaging deglutenised beer for a major retailer that head brewer Andy Hepworth at Hepworth Brewery discovered most of his beers were already naturally gluten-free.

Using a high quality, low-gluten barley and high temperatures during production, initially devised to improve taste, the West Sussex brewery now produces eight gluten-free beers ranging from pale ales to bitters.

Enzyme-based method

Allendale Brewery in Hexham, Northumberland, originally used sorghum to produce its gluten-free beer, but head brewer Neil Thomas has since developed the recipe and process to make its main product GFPA (4.7% ABV) by breaking down the gluten molecules with a natural enzyme. It has also made several of its core range as gluten-free and it's testing other gluten-free versions as well.

“We have seen the market for gluten-free beer grow from almost nothing to where it is now over the last few years,” said Thomas. “As more people become aware that perhaps they have been living with a gluten intolerance for some time, they will look for gluten-free options to enjoy, in the same beer styles they enjoyed before.”

Hambleton Ales is one of the more established players in the gluten-free market. The Yorkshire brewery, which is



Natural goodness: Hepworth Brewery's gluten-free range

run by the Stafford family, branched out into gluten-free 14 years ago with the launch of its flagship GFA (4.8% ABV), voted the UK and Europe's best gluten-free beer at the World Beer Awards 2015, after a family member was diagnosed coeliac.

"We realised, through a family connection, that there were many people that couldn't enjoy our beers," said brewery manager Ben Harrison. "We therefore decided that there was a market for good, drinkable beer, that didn't have gluten in it."

Harrison said that the brewery uses two methods for producing the beer: by selecting gluten-free grains and by using an enzyme to break down the gluten.

It also has an in-house bottling plant that enables full control of the brewing process and prevents any contamination from its other beers that contain gluten.

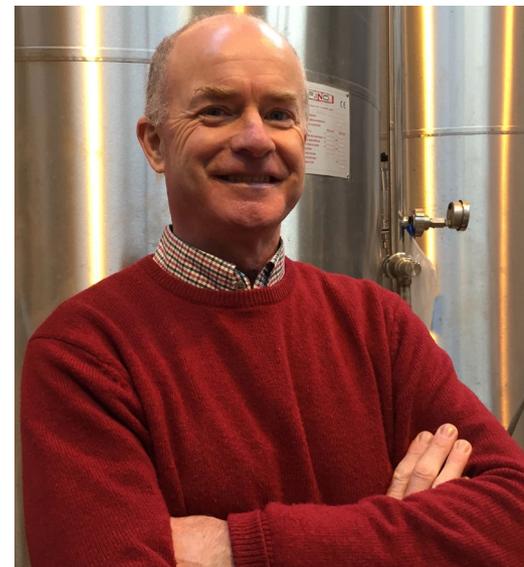
"Given the increased competition from new entrants, the brewery has seen a drop off in demand for its bottled beer", said Harrison. "However, there has been a spike in demand for our gluten-free Stud Blonde cask beer (4.3% ABV) with many pubs listing it as a permanent offering".

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Ben Harrison, Hambleton Ales



Award-winner: Hambleton Ales' GFA



Family business: Nick Stafford of Hambleton Ales

Chance discoveries

Based high on the Yorkshire Wolds, Wold Top Brewery stumbled across gluten-free almost by chance. Approached by a gluten-free club with a recipe, owners Tom and Gill Mellor decided to give it a try and came up with Wold Top Against the Grain (4.5% ABV).

The brewery now makes a lager style bitter, an English IPA and a porter, the pick of which is the Scarborough Fair IPA (6% ABV), according to brewery manager Alex Balchin. And he believes gluten-free's growth in popularity will only continue given the number of breweries joining the movement.

"The market will continue growing as it is currently," he said. "There are a lot more resources available to brewers to enable them to join the gluten-free market and customer preference for beers that are 'good for them' is still a big factor."

Westerham Brewery's founder and head brewer Robert Wicks also saw a niche in the gluten-free market for a quality product. A chance conversation with a contractor who put logo transfers on the brewery's vehicles and a subsequent trip to a gluten-free brewery called Omission in Portland, America and he was soon brewing his own.

Wicks said that the Kent-based brewery's capacity means it can scale up to offer an extensive range of beers, producing 5,500HL per year. Among its core range are no fewer than eight gluten-free varieties from pilsners to stouts, as well as producing Kent IPA, a gluten-free pale ale for M&S.

"When we first began producing gluten-free beers there were relatively few on the market and so customer choice was limited," said Wicks. "Using Brewer's Clarex, an enzyme originally designed to prevent chill-haze, to render the beer gluten-free allowed us to offer a wide range of beers to the gluten-free customer without compromising on taste or quality."

Each batch of beer is independently tested and verified, and you can even look up each bottle's certification online using the lot code on the back, according to Wicks.



Family affair: The Wold Top Brewery team

"Because there's no need to substitute any of the gluten-containing ingredients, the beer's taste is not compromised either", he added. "As people's awareness of their own health increases and their tastes develop, so more brewers are likely to join the gluten-free revolution. It's only a question of when, not if, you see them stocked soon at your local boozer".

What is gluten-free beer?

Gluten-free beer is designed for people who have gluten-intolerance, coeliac disease or dermatitis herpetiformis, meaning that they have a reaction to certain proteins in the grains commonly used to make beer, namely barley and wheat.

It is also popular with those who chose to follow the paleo eating plan or have decided to cut down on their gluten intake for health reasons.

It's made either by swapping out the barley used in the brewing process for alternative ingredients that don't contain gluten such as millet, rice, sorghum, buckwheat or corn. Or you can add an enzyme to the beer that will break down the barley's protein strands and therefore reduce its gluten level. The advantage of using an enzyme is that it's cheaper to use than the naturally gluten-free alternative.

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Alex Balchin, Wold Top Brewery

However, in some cases the gluten levels may still be higher than those beers produced using gluten-free ingredients without enzymes and concerns have also been raised that they may not be safe for people with coeliac disease.

To classify as gluten-free, the beer must contain 20 parts per million of gluten or less, according to European Union rules. Among the market leaders in gluten-free are Asahi, Carlsberg, Coors, Greene King and S.A. Damm.