

With some tweaks, cans make comeback in craft beer

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In this Monday, June 3, 2013 photo, cans of Helles Golden Lager with a 360 Lid are displayed at the Sly Fox Brewing Company, in Pottstown, Pa. Brewers and consumers debate using bottles or cans, innovation of the age-old staple continues as breweries seek to differentiate themselves on expanding beer shelves. Budweiser is selling a bowtie-shaped can that mirrors its iconic logo, Miller Lite is sold in a punch-top can, Sam Adams Boston Lager comes in cans designed to improve taste and now Sly Fox Brewing Co. is selling beer in "topless" cans with a peel-back lid that essentially turns it into a glass. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

Nearly 80 years ago Richmond revolutionized the beer world. For it was in this Southern city in 1935 that canned beer—complete with how-to instructions—was first sold.

Krueger's Cream Ale and its punch-top can became an instant hit, propelling the humble beer can to iconic status. That is, until Americans returned to bottles and the beloved craft brews they contained, a cultural turn that left canned beer looking decidedly low-brow.

But more recently craft brewers rediscovered [cans](#), realizing they weren't just retro-cool, but with a few tweaks might even be able to kick bottles in the can.

Welcome to the beer can revolution, 2013-style. Technology once again is transforming how Americans drink their beer.

Today, Budweiser sells a bow tie-shaped can that mirrors its iconic logo, Miller Lite sports a punch-top can, drinkers know their Coors Light is cold when the mountains on the can turn blue, Sam Adams Boston Lager comes in cans designed to improve the taste, and now Sly Fox Brewing Co. sells beer in "topless" cans designed to turn into cups when opened.

"It's not your father's beer can anymore," says Jim Koch, founder and owner of the Boston Beer Co., the maker of Sam Adams.

Both craft brewers and craft beer drinkers are coming around to the idea of cans. More affordable supplies and canning equipment also are helping the boom. In 2002, just one craft brewery was using cans. Now around 300 different breweries offer close to 1,000 beers in cans, according to [CraftCans.com](#), a site that tracks the canned beer revolution.



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"Craft beer in cans is becoming more mainstream each and every day," says Brian Thiel, regional sales manager with packaging firm Crown Holdings. "The stigma that has existed continues to get lifted."

Koch, a self-proclaimed purist, at first "stubbornly resisted" putting Sam Adams in cans. But after spending more than two years and \$1 million developing a couple dozen prototypes, the "Sam Can" was born. Koch

says that with a bigger lid and a more defined lip, the redesigned can forces your mouth open more and puts your nose closer to the opening, creating a better flavor experience.

Admittedly, it's "not going to make the angels sing when you drink it," says Koch, who is allowing other craft breweries to use the redesigned can. "But my experience with Sam Adams since I started it in my kitchen is that slight but noticeable improvements constantly and repeated over 30 years makes a great beer."

Meanwhile, Sly Fox Brewing Co. decided to go all the way and blew the lid off with its cans—literally.

In April, the Pennsylvania brewery began selling its Helles Golden Lager in cans with a peel-off top (think soup can). While litter laws prevent it from being sold in all states it distributes in, the can is getting noticed. The brewery also sells its flagship Pikeland Pils in the same cans exclusively at Citizens Bank Park, the home of the Philadelphia Phillies.



In this Monday, June 3, 2013 photo, Brewmaster Brian O'Reilly holds a can of Helles Golden Lager with a 360 Lid as he poses for a portrait at the Sly Fox Brewing Company, in Pottstown, Pa. Brewers and consumers debate using bottles or cans, innovation of the age-old staple continues as breweries seek to differentiate themselves on expanding beer shelves. Budweiser is selling a bowtie-shaped can that mirrors its iconic logo, Miller Lite is sold in a punch-top can, Sam Adams Boston Lager comes in cans designed to improve taste and now Sly Fox Brewing Co. is selling beer in "topless" cans with a peel-back lid that essentially turns it into a glass. (AP Photo/Matt Rourke)

"There have been a lot of different mini-innovations ... but never that important to craft beer," said Sly Fox brewmaster Brian O'Reilly. "(The new can) is different and interesting to people, but there's a real benefit because you can smell the beer ... it really allows you to appreciate the full character of the beer."

Sly Fox still cans several of its beers in traditional aluminum cans and defends the polished package as a perfect fit for craft beer.

Its website even has a page that encourages beer drinkers to "respect the cans because the cans respect the beer." The page lists the benefits of cans—portable, space-saving, faster-cooling, more light-resistant and super-recyclable—and debunks myths that the cans impart a metallic taste to beer, are unsophisticated and don't store as well as bottles.



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The can now used by Sly Fox was first debuted by Crown Holdings at the FIFA World Cup soccer tournament in South Africa in 2010 as part of a partnership with SABMiller.

While many of the innovations tout a better drinking experience, there is a marketing element to it, too.

"What's next may be cool, it may be setting themselves apart. But there is a point where it becomes gimmicky and it loses its functionality and its form and its integrity," Thiel said.

Sam Adams' Koch agrees: "If it doesn't make the [beer](#) taste better, then don't do it just to get noticed," he said. "The customer will reward you with more of their business if you give them a better tasting product than their alternatives."

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