

# Bigger Is Better

Beer lovers are increasingly gravitating toward larger bottle sizes

Craig and Tiffany Adamowski, owners of the specialty beer store 99 Bottles in Seattle, believe that good things come in large packages, especially in the realm of beer. 99 Bottles stocks hundreds of beers in oversized containers, including 22-ounce, 25-ounce and 750-ml. bottles—containers that have become increasingly popular among beer drinkers.

In fact, of the seven cooler doors devoted to American beers at 99 Bottles, three house big bottles of mostly craft brews. Another two doors are dedicated to large bottles of imported beers, ranging in size from 16.9 ounces to 750-ml. bottle. Prices start at \$3.69 for a 22-ounce bottle of High-Five Hefe and go up to \$47 for a 25.4-ounce bottle of Scaldis Prestige. Top-sellers include Stone Brewing's Arrogant Bastard (\$4.99 a 22-ounce bottle) and Russian River Brewing's Pliny the Elder (\$5.49 a 500-ml. bottle, sold with a limit of two bottles per customer).

Craig estimates that large-format bottles comprise between 20 and 30 percent of the store's total sales, and that share is growing. In addition to offering value, beers sold in bigger sizes are gaining popularity, with seasonal brews often exclusively packaged in 22-ounce bottles. Indeed, big bottles represent a whopping 60 percent of 99 Bottles' domestic beer sales. "If I had my way, big bottles would be all I carry," Craig says. He explains that 22-ounce bombers—generally packaged 12 to a case—are easily stocked in the cooler at nine bottles deep, with eight rows per shelf. Cases of four six-packs, he continues, aren't as easy to accommodate.

"Big bottles are getting a ton of interest from retailers," says Joe Lipa, national sales manager at Merchant du Vin Corp., importer of Samuel Smith (\$3.49 to \$3.99 a 18.7-ounce bottle, depending on the market) and Lindeman's (\$10.99 to \$11.99 a 750-ml. bottle). Supermarkets, including chains like Safeway, Super-Valu, Sprouts Farmers Markets and Wegmans, are increasingly attracted to the higher ring of bigger bottles, as compared to 12-ounce singles. "These retailers would prefer that consumers were buying 12-packs at \$14.99. But because the economy has slowed those types of purchases, they're finding opportunity in big bottles," Lipa explains. Supermarket operators also want consumers who gravitate toward big

bottles in their stores because they're more likely to buy high-quality meats and fish, the importer adds. Lipa says the trend is now spreading to big box operators, as Costco recently ordered pallets of Merchant du Vin large bottles for sale in its stores.

Big beer bottles are also a hit on-premise. Belga Café, a Belgian-themed restaurant in Washington, D.C., has offered large bottles of beer since opening five years ago, says chef and owner Bart Vandaele. About two dozen of the restaurant's 135 Belgian brews come in big bottles, priced from \$16.25 for a 750-ml. bottle of Gouden Carolus to \$180 for a 3-liter bottle of Chimay Grand Reserve Blue. Each beer is served in its signature glassware.



*Belga Café's beer sommelier Jens Pifereon oversees a menu of 135 Belgian brews, including roughly two dozen in large bottles.*

When expanding into new markets, New Belgium Brewing Co., the Colorado-based brewer and marketer of Fat Tire Amber, leads with 22-ounce bombers. The brewer feels that in addition to being practical for sampling, the large size provides good visibility in new markets. New Belgium bombers, including the Lips of Faith series, are generally priced from \$2.99 to \$3.99.

"A lot of folks only want 22-ounce bottles, because they see them as a better deal," says 99 Bottles' Tiffany Adamowski. Her husband, Craig, adds that some consumers consider 22-ounce bottles to be special and therefore justify spending more money. Belga Café's Vandaele, meanwhile, says that in addition to value, big beer bottles—like large-format wine bottles—offer quality control. "They develop better, age better and stay fresh longer," he explains. Vandaele estimates that between 15 and 20 percent of Belga Café's beer sales come from large bottles.

Big bottles of beer also provide people with a good alternative to wine, for consumption both on- and off-premise. "We see a spike in big bottles during the holiday season," Tiffany Adamowski of 99 Bottles reports. "Some people want a 25-ounce bottle to serve with dinner or for sharing." Likewise, Vandaele notes that his customers often opt to share a big bottle of beer rather than wine with dinner. That practice, the restaurateur says, helps explain beer's recent 30-percent sales gain over wine at Belga Café, proving that value for customers can also equal profit for business operators.

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