

# Airlines Offer In-Flight Craft Beer

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In this Tuesday, July 2, 2013 photo from AP Images for Samuel Adams, Jim Koch, founder and brewer of Samuel Adams, right, and Marty St. George, SVP of Marketing and Commercial at JetBlue hold cans of beer prior to boarding the inaugural JetBlue flight from Boston to New York. As the airline industry works to improve its food and beverage options, a new trend has emerged - airlines adding craft beers to their in-flight offerings. Passengers aboard six North American airlines spent more than \$11.3 million on beer during a five-month period in 2013, according to GuestLogic, which processes about 90 percent of onboard credit card transactions for North American carriers. (AP Photo/AP Images for Samuel Adams, Bizuayehu Tesfaye)

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Attention passengers, craft beer has reached 35,000 feet.

As the airline industry works to improve its food and beverage options, a new trend has emerged — airlines adding craft beers to their in-flight offerings. The assumption is that as more drinkers switch from mass market beers to specialty brews, they'll be happier if they don't have to give up the good stuff when they're in the air.

"We already had our drinkers on airplanes, we just didn't have the beer," says Jim Koch, co-founder of the Boston Beer Co., maker of Sam Adams. "They want to drink in the air what they're drinking on the ground."

It's another sign that airlines are getting better at responding to changing consumer tastes. And Americans certainly have developed a taste for craft beer. U.S. craft beer retail sales reached \$14.3 billion in 2013, an increase of 20 percent from a year earlier, according to the Brewers Association, the trade group for the majority of U.S. brewing companies. The move also helps craft brewers gain brand awareness.

While some Delta shuttle flights have offered Sam Adams in bottles for about 20 years and Virgin America has offered beer from San Francisco's 21st Amendment Brewery for a few years, a critical mass of other airlines has joined them recently. Reasons for the surge include the craft beer industry's new preference for cans over bottles — which are lighter and easier to store on drink carts — as well as greater

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availability of the beers.

Southwest Airlines began selling cans of New Belgium Brewing Co.'s Fat Tire on its nearly 700 Southwest and AirTran planes earlier this year. Cans of Sam Adams joined the mile-high club with JetBlue over the summer, Alaska Airlines and its sister carrier Horizon Air offer brews from the Pacific Northwest and Hawaii, and last month regional carrier Sun Country partnered with Minneapolis' Surly Brewing Co. to sell craft beer from its home base.

"Pretty much any time there's an opportunity to have a beer, whether it be at a sports venue, or at a club, or on a plane, I'd like to be able to have some craft beer," said Omar Ansari, founder of Surly Brewing Co. "One of the big pieces to making that all work is that we finally have enough beer. ... There's a demand for it and a lot of breweries are making a lot more beer."

And that's what passengers are telling airlines, too.

"(Customers) began asking more and more for craft beer," says Sonya Lacore, senior director of base operations for Southwest. "We're running out of Fat Tire right now. ... It's clear that they are really going all out for it."

Of course, it's not all good news. Much like the taste of food generally suffers inflight, craft brews also lose a little oomph at that altitude. Drinkers' sense of taste can be a little dulled to the aromatics of the beers, and bitterness can be accentuated, reducing the overall taste, says Koch. Naturally, he said, a balanced malty and hoppy beer is best.

"It is interesting, your taste buds operate slightly differently," Koch said.

Still, beer — craft or otherwise — isn't typically the most popular alcoholic beverage sold on airplanes.

Passengers aboard six North American airlines spent more than \$11.3 million on beer during a five-month period last year, according to GuestLogix, which processes about 90 percent of onboard credit card transactions for North American carriers. By comparison, liquor sales neared \$38 million and wine sales topped \$14 million during that same period.

On Southwest, where all of its alcohol is priced at \$5, beer runs neck-and-neck to its liquor sales, Lacore said.

But Koch says the size of the in-flight beer business is smaller than the statement being made about demand for craft beer. And the growing interest in craft beer could help send sales on planes soaring.

Koch predicts that most flights that have beer will offer craft beer by the end of next year.

"This is one more step for craft beer becoming a more widely accepted experience

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for people," Koch said.

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