

Feds Let Brewers, Beer Drinkers Get a Little Closer

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RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — There's a little less bureaucratic red tape standing between you and your next brew.

Federal officials have simplified parts of the approval process for bringing new beers to market, something that in the past could take months. The changes mean consumers could see new brews showing up in stores and bars more quickly, while brewers will enjoy greater flexibility to experiment with ingredients and production techniques.

"It's great news in terms of streamlining for the brewer," says Paul Gatza, director of the Brewers Association, a Colorado-based trade group for the majority of the 2,800 brewing companies in the United States. "It does give (brewers) greater freedom and chances are beer drinkers will have more options of beers available to them."

The rule change, announced last week by the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, greenlights the use of more than 30 ingredients — including honey, certain fruits, spices and coffee — in beer recipes without getting formula approval. It also says producers no longer need prior approval to age beer in barrels previously used to store wine and distilled spirits, a popular trend among the growing craft beer market.

Formula approvals from the agency have averaged about 70 days and are needed before brewers get their labels approved, which in itself can take more than 15 days, according to the agency.

The move acknowledges the changes to beer since the days when American brews weren't exactly known for their diversity. It "better reflects today's reality, the use of common, if atypical, ingredients in beer," says Gary Fish, founder of Deschutes Brewery in Bend, Oregon, the nation's sixth-largest craft brewery.

At Strangeways Brewing in Richmond — where the motto is "Think Strange. Drink Strange." — brewer Mike Hiller says that, in some cases, it's taken brewers more than six months to get a barrel-aged beer to market.

"Brewers are going to be a little less leery of using particular ingredients ... but we're making goofy beer one way or another," joked Hiller, who makes beers such as Gourd of Thunder Imperial Pumpkin Porter, Woodbooger Belgian-Style Brown Ale and Cranberry Disintegration Barrel-Aged IPA.

"If we want to tweak any of our recipes then we don't have to go through the entire process once again just to make a simple change," he says.

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Founders Brewing Co. brewmaster Jeremy Kosmicki says his team at the Grand Rapids, Michigan, brewery always has been encouraged to experiment with ingredients it feels will make a great beer; now that will be easier. Founders is well-known for its limited KBS, or Kentucky Breakfast Stout, an imperial stout brewed with a massive amount of coffee and chocolate and then cave-aged in oak bourbon barrels for a year.

"Anything that can expedite the process of bringing a new beer to beer enthusiasts is welcomed," he said. "It allows us to be nimble."

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