# Because Stale Beer Sucks

BY
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The craft brewing world may be in a state of denial. Even in the U.S., there seems to be a lingering tendency to still consider beer a commodity.

If you read this column, you know that I enjoy good beer. When I buy beer, I'm not unlike most beer drinkers. I buy beer that I hope fulfills my expectations. While I continue to homebrew, I also pursue better beer in the U.S. and the rest of the world. I'm always seeking great beer experiences.

Beer and brewing wisdom is easily accessible these days. Some of it is technical, some practical; it's available for both the beer drinker and all the people involved with beer. My countless beer experiences have pointed to some very simple beer truths.

**Truth #1:** The best beer is fresh beer, or in the condition the brewer intended it to be.

**Truth #2:** The best beer is fresh beer, and is at its best where it is brewed.

**Truth #3:** Knowledge, caring, and experience are not enough to assure that beer gets to the beer drinker in excellent condition.

**Half Truth #4:** When you buy beer in the market, the closer you are to the brewery whose beer you are drinking, the more likely you are going to get fresh beer. (Sadly, this is not always the situation.)

If you are a smart brewer with a successful brewery, you know that brewing and packaging quality beer is absolutely essential. Technical knowledge of ingredients, equipment, processing, brewing, fermenting, packaging, and subsequent care is complex and extensive; everything is dependent on all components. But all of this knowledge, care, and experience are often wasted.

Deflated? After all that expertise you've developed within your company, I'm saying it isn't enough. Why? Because in the U.S. and the rest of the world, beer is still treated as a commodity!

Beer's legacy as a commodity is pervasive, like an incurable disease. Many logistics people who handle beer after it has left the brewery don't prioritize cold shipping, storage, and shelf space. This doesn't seem to happen with other types of food and beverages. Butter is kept cold so it won't melt. Ice cream is kept cold so it won't thaw. Is beer kept cold so it doesn't degrade in the warmth? In many situations, the answer is no. Whether it is at a brewery warehouse, distributor warehouse and transport, retailer warehouse and transport, or at the point of purchase, craft beer needs to be kept cold.

Non-refrigerated beer is a fundamental problem that needs to be addressed as a top priority in the distribution and retail system. Change and modernization are needed because the system fails the beer drinker. It should be a top priority for every brewer.

If I sound like an angry beer drinker, I am. I'm too often frustrated with buying great, well-made beer, only to pour a lousy, oxidized, stale beer into my glass. Practically speaking, I won't risk my dollars buying that brand again in that particular market. Disappointing, but true.

This is not a big-versus-small issue. Craft brewers' brands from breweries of all size are susceptible as they make their way through an inadequate transportation, distribution, warehouse, and retail system. West Coast beers sold on the East Coast are often oxidized and stale. I've had East Coast brands sold west of the Mississippi that are embarassingly old tasting and oxidized. Many are often well within the shelf life dates on the packages. Some have not traveled all that far, but they consistently experience the vagaries of the market system and are often destroyed in the process.

All the technical expertise, quality concern, and care go to naught when beer suffers in warm spaces on trucks, in distribution warehouses, at retail storage, and on warm shelves in grocery stores. I know a lot of craft brewers who care and go to great lengths to brew, ferment, and package their beer in the best of condition. But ultimately, their beers can suffer for want of distributor and retail care.