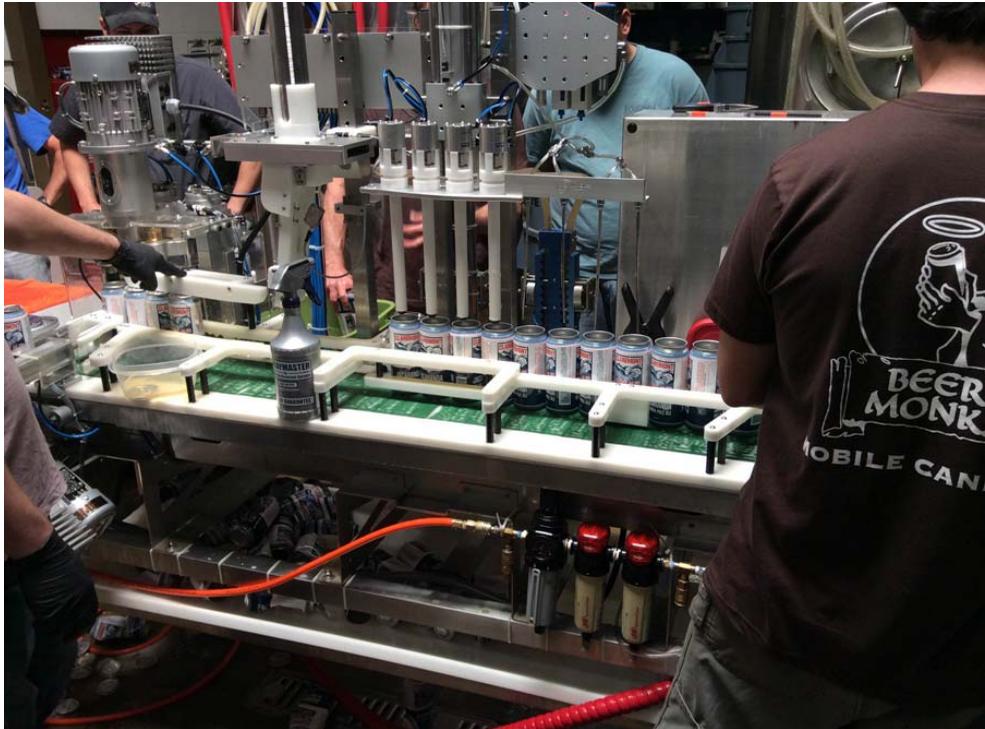


The Brew Monks: Mobile Canners Now Serving LA Breweries

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A bright ray of sun illuminates a single can among the stack. Soon it will be picked and its short journey will begin, the conveyor belt moving it inexorably towards destiny.

Or that is how a poet might put it, watching a craft beer be canned by a small group of people who work together to shepherd empty cans from pallet to case. Each vessel is perfectly filled once its journey through the machine is complete.

Canning lines are whirring, buzzing contraptions; aluminum cans wind their way through while being sprayed, spun, and finally filled with beer before tops are crimped on. It's a loud, messy, and large machine, and in addition to the capital cost of the equipment, canning lines take up space.

Space that, in most craft breweries, is at a premium. Desks are wedged into dark closets, holes are cut into buildings for bigger fermentation tanks, and if the space next door becomes free it's usually gobbled up by bourbon barrels for aging. What is rarely talked about is space for the packaging line: or how the beer gets into bottles or cans so that it can grace the shelf at your local beer shop. How does a brewery get its flagship ale into a bottle or can when there is no room for the equipment, or no extra staff to run it?

That is where mobile packaging services come into play, and the Los Angeles area now has the Beer Monks to fill the mobile canning niche.

Greg Kinne and Mike Nalick met as members of a mountain rescue unit and came to realize that they both loved craft beer. One thing led to another and now, after training in Colorado with breweries big and small, they have now landed in Sierra Madre and are starting to gather clients who want to offer their beer in more than just kegs and growlers.

Canned beer is already a popular option in SoCal. Golden Road led the charge for LA and now you will see cans from Modern Times of San Diego, Anderson Valley of Boonville, Pizza Port from Bressi Ranch and Black Market from Temecula regularly on shelves. With less weight, cans are easier to ship and stack; plus they can



be taken to many places where bottles are forbidden, which plays into the region's active surf, ski, bike and hike culture.

Beer Monks is a franchisee, so to speak, of Mobile Canning Systems in Colorado, a company that provides resources and bulk pricing for a dozen or so affiliates across the country.

Like other mobile canning companies, Beer Monks roll in the canning equipment, lock down the wheels, sanitize anything and everything, hook up to the brite tank, make adjustments depending on the style of the beer and then, as Kinne explained via e-mail, once "dialed in, run at about 30 -40 cans per minute." That can be for either six or four-packs. 12-ounce cans or 16. The Beer Monks monitor the equipment and brewery staff and volunteers pack up the cans as they are seamed shut. When the canning is complete, they pack up all their equipment and the unfilled cans into their truck and head out and "leave ready-to-distribute beer behind..."

A week after trading e-mails, Beer Monks was at Claremont Craft Ales helping their Jacaranda Rye IPA get into 16 ounce cans. Kinne was intent upon a tiny screen that monitored what was flowing through the system. "Two's a little off," he'd say, and a green light atop the machine would start blinking. The line would smoothly stop so adjustments could be made, and just as smoothly, the line would be flowing again.

Zooming in on the action, the wheeled apparatus is about 12 feet long. Eddie Martinez of the Beer Monks team loads the cans into the chute after checking to make sure there are no obvious defects in the structure of the can or label. The empties then run down a short track for sanitizing and then go under the fillers. They are filled quickly, then sealed, before making a sharp right turn to a cleansing bucket where Nalick grabs them and hands them off to be weighed to make sure that the customer is getting what they paid for. Then volunteers put the holders on the four packs before they get put first into cartons, and then a pallet to be stored in the brewery's cold box. Claremont has done canning runs of a 7bbl batch and a 15bbl batch, which yields between 70-140

cases, with six four-packs per case.

This was the third visit to Claremont for the Monks. With each canning run they dial into what is needed for this particular beer. So Jacaranda can have just the right carbonation and to make sure that less and less beer is spilled and more cans get correctly filled. The Monks also can alter the speed as well so that the volunteers can keep pace. Once that perfect mix is found, the Monks will program that into the computer and save it for the next (smoother and faster) run.

Kinne and Nalick can wheel their machine into any space that is the width of an average doorway and reconfigure their assembly line of tables to fit into tight spaces or around corners if needed. All the flexibility is designed to create a work flow that fits the need of each specific brewery space.

As the day went on, it was wet business underfoot with a mixture of beer, water and sanitizer. But the large stack of empty cans continued to dwindle along with the beer in the brite tank, until the seemingly monotonous task was complete.



There is no boredom in canning, however. Instead, there is constant monitoring, tweaking and communicating to ensure that the beer tastes as good from the can as it does from the tap. And as an added benefit to the end consumer, the Beer Monks “are now date stamping the handles (4-packs) with a date stamp gun.”

The Monk’s filled 86 cases that day, then began to break-down the machine. In 40 minutes the Monks were out of the way so the brewery could return to normal operations for

the day. Simon Brown the Director of Brewing Operations has called his experience with the Beer Monks “awesome.” “They are honest, hard working, flexible, and reliable,” he says.

Canning helps Claremont Craft Ales get their beers out into the world outside of their taproom. You can find the distinctive blue and orange cans of Jacaranda in independent stores from Pomona to Rancho Cucamonga.

In addition to Claremont Craft Ales, the Beer Monks are working with Figueroa Mountain Brewing Company and a few others who are still putting artwork together. Steve Kinsey from Kinetic Brewing came to see the machine in action and to see if it would be a fit for his distribution needs, so more cans may soon be on the way.

And as opposed to the earlier days of the craft beer movement, when cans were verboten and thought of as only for light adjunct lagers, most of the brewers that talk with the Beer Monks already know of the advantages of canning, though they may not know about the mobile possibilities since that’s a nascent part of the beer packaging industry as a whole.

But as more breweries open in Los Angeles, they will need creative ways to get their beer out the door of their small (or large) locations and into the hands of consumers and mobile canning may be the way to go.

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