

The Related Economics of Small-Beer in the U.S.: Literature of the Past Decade

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Abstract

With rising production costs, market saturation and declining consumption, small-beer in the U.S. is at a crossroads. This paper presents a concise review of 140 academic journal articles focused on the related economics surrounding microbreweries in the U.S. Themes include consumer perception, industry segment development, inputs and waste outputs, marketing, government regulation and brewery entry and exit – covering the period 2015 to mid 2026. Findings show that analyses of demand-side factors fueling proliferation have dominated the scholarship to date. As the industry segment matures, future research should focus less on past expansion and more on adaptation, resilience, and structural transformation.

Keywords: U.S. microbreweries, literature review, bibliometrics

JEL Classifications: A19, A39, L60

Introduction

Dramatic changes have occurred in the U.S. beer industry during the last four decades. Relaxation of states' on-premises consumption laws in the 1980s and 1990s spurred the unprecedented expansion of, mostly, small-scale production facilities (Elzinga et al., 2015).² From 2010 to date, reporting brewery counts have increased four-fold (TTB, 2026). This recent increase in industry activity has not escaped detection by academics. Journal publications addressing small-beer, internationally, have grown significantly since 2015 (see reviews: Durán-Sánchez et al., 2022; Nave et al., 2022; Gobbi et al., 2024; Sophocleous et al., 2026). To provide an overview of the related economics for small-beer in the U.S., we forward a concise review of academic journal articles published from 2015 to mid 2026.

Method

To start, we relied on the largest bibliographic database dedicated to the broad Economics field – IDEAS, which is part of Research Papers in Economics (RePEc). RePEc indexes well over 5 million economic related research works. Our journal article query involved the keywords: “craft beer” OR “small beer industry” OR “microbrewery” appearing anywhere in the record. This led to a total of 164 articles. We then limited our focus to journal articles pertaining to the U.S. market directly or, as in a few papers, generality to the industry or comparisons to the U.S. yielding 98 RePEc papers. To exhaust our search, we snowballed articles citing the RePEc finds. This process led to a final journal focused

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² In 2025, of the roughly 7,300 facilities reporting production to the U.S. Department of Treasury, Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau (TTB), 80 percent produced 1,000 or less 31-gallon barrels.

bibliography of 140 economic related papers.³ The articles were then grouped by theme: **P** consumer demographics and perceptions (33 papers), **HD** industry history and development (25 papers), **IO** economics of inputs and waste output (24 papers), **M** marketing strategies (20 papers), **G** effects of government regulation (16 papers), **S** brewery siting and agglomeration (16 papers), and **F** brewery failure (6 papers).⁴ These categories roughly follow those used in the more broad reviews of Withers (2017), Smith et al. (2017) and Nave et al. (2022).

Theme discussion

The most populated category, consumer demographics and perceptions, captures papers attempting to identify characteristics of the small-beer drinker in the U.S. Just who are these patrons and what lures them to the brewery or packaged retailed product? Generally, the literature finds the small-beer consumer to be a more than high school educated, moderately well off, 40ish white male who responds to perceived localism, authenticity and sustainable business practices. Papers in the industry history and development category tend to focus on origin dynamics and segment evolution. Interestingly, most research agrees that U.S. House Bill 1337, the 1978 decriminalization of home brewing, launched the small-beer mania.⁵ The economics of inputs and waste output groups articles related to production inputs and environmental impacts of brewery waste. Hops, water, energy and labor attract the most interest regarding inputs while wastewater issues dominate the environmental analyses. The rather broad category, marketing strategies, includes studies that center on big-picture marketing tactics. Findings suggest that successful marketing of microbreweries requires agility and a cohesive marketing mix which includes product/service, place, price and promotion. Moreover, the use of social media in marketing is vital for these small ventures. Papers on government regulation concentrate on legislation and/or government policy that has impacted small-beer. On-premises consumption legislation, tied-house and wholesale distribution law, land use regulation, and Covid-19 restrictions dominate this literature segment. Brewery siting and agglomeration articles focus on supply and demand factors that may sway location choice. The reviewed literature suggests that demand-side factors, specifically population demographics, are most important in location choice and resultant clustering. Lastly, with the maturation of the small-beer market in the U.S., analyses of brewery failure are gradually becoming a research topic with growth potential.

Bibliometrics

Figure 1 and Tables 1 and 2 below show the chronology of reviewed articles, the main journals publishing the work and the key authors in the related fields.

³ By design, we did not include the 23 papers published in the Journal of Beer Economics through July 2026.

⁴ The boxed tag (e.g. **P**) allows for theme identification of all 140 papers listed alphabetically in the References section below.

⁵ 95th Congress, HR 1337. Public Law 95-458-92 STAT. 1255-1261. Enacted October 14, 1978, by President Jimmy Carter.

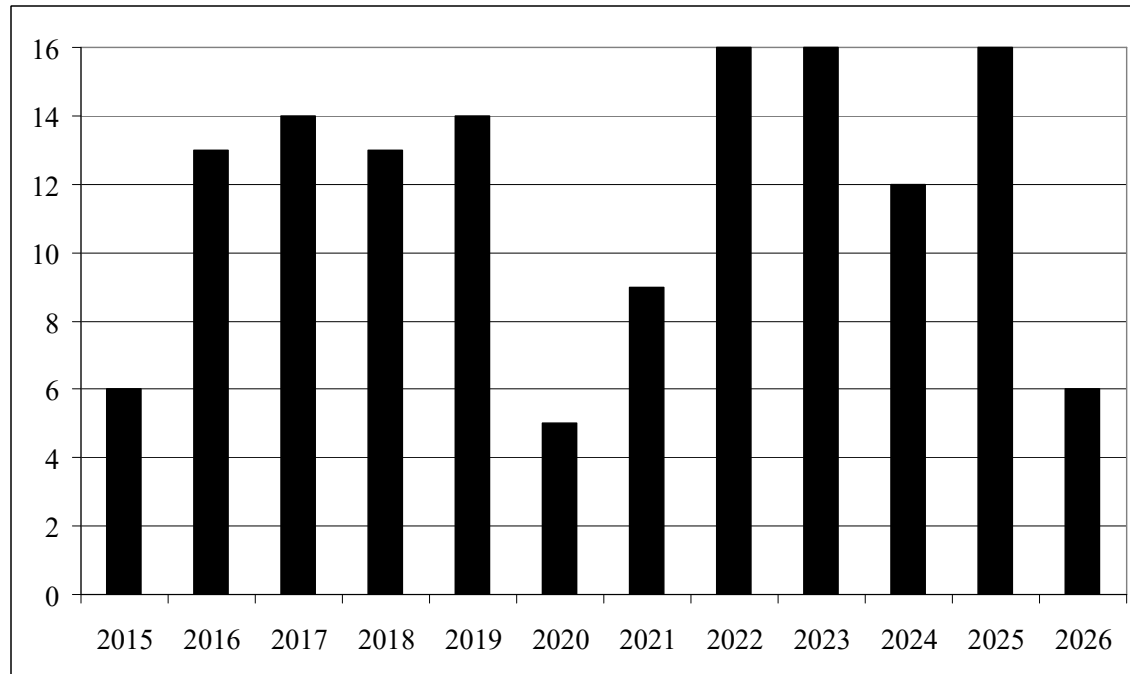


Figure 1. Article count by year.

Table 1. Journals with 4 or more articles.

Journal	Article Count
Journal of Wine Economics (Cambridge University Press)	8
Beverages (MDPI)	6
International Journal of Hospitality Beverage Management (University of Houston)	5
Sustainability (MDPI)	5
Agribusiness (Wiley)	4
Business History (Taylor and Francis)	4
Journal of Foodservice Business Research (Taylor and Francis)	4
International Journal of Wine Business Research (Emerald Publishing)	4

Table 2. Authors with 4 or more publications.

Author	Article Count
Neil Reid, Toledo	13
Trey Malone, Purdue	7
Scott Taylor, Jr., South Carolina	6
J. Cameron Verhaal, Tulane	6
Jayson Lusk, Oklahoma State	5
Jay Gatrell, Eastern Illinois	4
Jake Hoskins, Willamette	4
Michael McCullough, California Polytechnic	4
Isabelle Nilsson, Cleveland State	4
Erol Sozen, Illinois State	4
Aaron Staples, Illinois Urbana-Champaign	4

The most widely cited paper, Kenneth Elzinga et al. (2015), logged 301 citations according to Google Scholar and 210 citations by ResearchGate to date.

Research avenues

As mentioned above, brewery failure will provide a fertile research avenue as the small-beer market matures and saturation pressures intensify (Berry and Routon, 2026). Analyses of the drivers leading to closure will likely prevail. In contrast, a literature focusing on the survivors would be more compelling. In other words, what worked for small breweries in the U.S. versus what did not. Moreover, a shift to longitudinal data studies tracking regional patterns, demographic influences, and externalities on local economies would be welcomed.⁶

As production costs rise with falling demand, more regional breweries are starting to outsource portions, if not all, of their production to large contract facilities. Ventures like Octopi in Wisconsin, Sleeping Giant and Wilding Brands in Colorado are gaining existing brands and production. Research targeting whether contract brewing serves as a lifeline for these brands or as a path toward industry consolidation is certainly warranted. Together, closures and contract brewing could frame a new segment in small-beer scholarship—one focused less on past expansion and more on adaptation, resilience, and necessary structural transformation of the industry segment.

⁶ Most of the work reviewed herein relied on case studies or targeted surveys.

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