



The Low-Color Trend Guide

Contents:

Market Context: What's Driving This Trend	<u>01</u>
What's Actually Changing	<u>03</u>
Ingredient Implications	<u>04</u>
SRM Targets	<u>06</u>
What This Means for Brewery Operations	<u>07</u>



The Ultra-Pale Era: Why Low-Color Beer Is Becoming the New Competitive Baseline

A clear shift is underway toward paler, lower-SRM beers across lagers, traditional ales, and even hop-forward styles. Brewers are responding to drinkability pressure, visual expectations at the tap, and renewed interest in classic profiles. This trend raises the bar for ingredient precision, especially malt color consistency, fermentation performance, and subtle hop usage. Low color is no longer cosmetic. It is a process constraint.

Market Context: What's Driving This Trend

Four pressures are converging, and they all point the same way.

Drinkability is non-negotiable

Volume growth is coming from beers that look pale, finish clean, and hold up over multiple pints. Anheuser-Busch continues to cite Busch Light as a share and volume gainer, while Michelob Ultra anchors Super Bowl spend going into the 2026 cycle. Pale color acts as a shortcut for approachability. When beers look light, trial-and-repeat increases.

Style fatigue is selective, not a retreat

Brewers are editing, not abandoning flavor. Heavy, opaque, calorie-dense beers underperform in distribution and rarely earn a second pint. Even hop-forward beers are being reformulated to finish paler and leaner because restraint sells more consistently than intensity.



Gen Z is rewriting occasion behavior

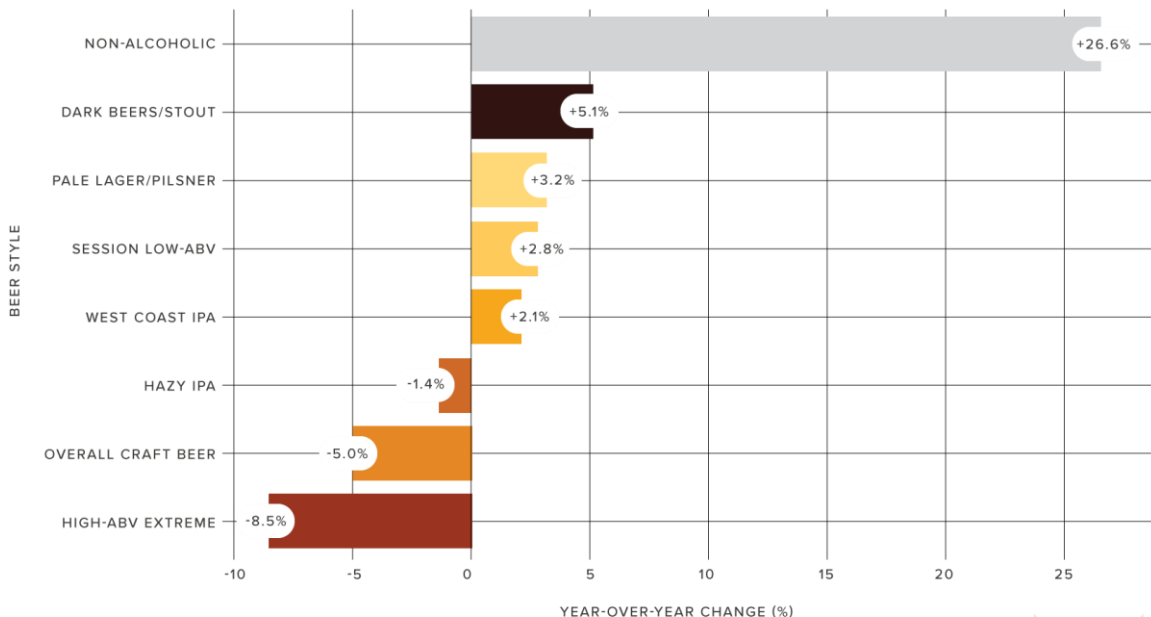
Alcohol consumption is down 25% in four years, and at dining occasions beer trails significantly: 19% (Gen Z) vs 33% (Millennials), with similar gaps in wine and spirits. This is not about flavor - it's identity. Beer now competes directly with RTDs, seltzers, NA, and THC beverages. Lower perceived heaviness reduces psychological commitment. Bright, clean, straw-pale beer wins trial in a moderation-driven market.

The signal is global and operational

Retail data from Super Liquor Group shows low-carb beers at 27.3% of total beer sales. On the West Coast, VinePair's January 2025 outlook flags pilsner, Helles, Kölsch, and pale wheat beers shifting into year-round roles. Sales teams now report brewers asking for the lowest available SRM base malts and treating color as a competitive benchmark, not a byproduct.

BEER STYLE PERFORMANCE IN 2025

YEAR-OVER-YEAR CHANGES, MARKET SHARE EVOLUTION, AND LONG TERM GROWTH PROJECTIONS



Source: The US beer market experienced dramatic stylistic realignment in 2025, driven by shifting consumer preferences toward approachability, affordability, and drinkability. Pale lagers and seltzers emerged as the only growing traditional styles, while non-alcoholic beer delivered an extraordinary 26.6% dollar sales growth and 21.6% volume growth. Conversely, heavy IPAs, the dominant style of craft beer's boom era, entered a novelty plateau, and high ABV extreme beers (double IPAs, barrel aged stouts, pastry variants) experienced measurable decline.

2024-2025 beer current trends show its cyclical resilience





What's Actually Changing

This is not a shift toward bland beer. It is a shift toward **controlled restraint**.

Visually, beers are moving toward the lower end of their historical color ranges. Pilsners under 2.0 SRM. Pale ales that stay visibly bright instead of drifting amber. Even hazy IPAs that read straw or pale gold instead of orange.

Sensory expectations follow. Brewers are prioritizing:

- Softer malt presence without residual sweetness
- Crisp finishes with minimal palate fatigue
- Hop expression that supports, not dominates
- Balance over novelty

Process-wise, this tightens tolerances. When color drops, flaws show faster. Oxidation is more obvious. Yeast character has nowhere to hide. Malt inconsistency becomes visible batch to batch.

Low color raises the standard. It does not lower it.

WHY BREWERS ARE GOING PALE ACROSS STYLES

DRINKABILITY, VISUAL TRUST, AND THE RETURN OF CLEAN LOOKING BEER

PALE STRAW

STRAW

PALE GOLD

DEEP GOLD



Ingredient Implications

Malt: Functional Requirements

To achieve very pale beers consistently, brewers are selecting malts with tight color specs, high fermentability, and neutral flavor contribution.

In practice, that means base malts in the **1.5–2.0** SRM range, sometimes lower, with minimal lot-to-lot variation. Extract yield matters more than ever because brewers are removing darker specialty malts that once padded gravity and mouthfeel.

Flavor neutrality becomes a feature, not a lack. Any huskiness, grainy sweetness, or residual color pickup stands out immediately in the finished beer.

Hops: Role Over Range

Low-color beers do not remove hops from the equation. They change the job description.

In pale lagers and clean ales, hops are used for **structure and balance**, not signature aroma. Brewers lean toward restrained bittering additions and late hopping that supports finish rather than drives it.

Efficiency matters. Over-hopping increases polyphenols and haze, which visually undermines the goal. Many brewers are shifting toward precise bittering tools or lower-impact aroma additions to avoid dragging color and turbidity upward.

This trend rewards discipline more than variety.



Yeast: Performance Over Personality

Yeast choice becomes unforgiving in pale beers.

High attenuation, predictable flocculation, and clean fermentation profiles take priority. Temperature tolerance matters because pale beers amplify ester drift and sulfur issues.

Brewers experimenting with expressive strains in low-color beers often pull back after tasting the result side by side with a cleaner fermentation. In darker or malt-forward beers, yeast personality can read as complexity. In pale beers, it often reads as noise.

Repeatability wins.

Supporting Ingredients

Low color exposes process gaps, so support tools matter more.

Clarification aids, oxygen control practices, and water treatment adjustments are increasingly part of the recipe conversation. Even a small iron pickup or an unadjusted mash pH can shift perception when the beer is visually stripped down.

Adjuncts and sugars appear selectively, often to enhance fermentability rather than flavor.

SRM: WHERE COLOR IS ACTUALLY LANDING

ACROSS STYLES, BREWERIES ARE TARGETING THE **BOTTOM END OF HISTORICAL COLOR RANGES**,
NOT REDEFINING STYLES OUTRIGHT

HISTORICAL
2.0-4.0 SRM



PILSNER/HELLES

2026 TARGET
1.8-2.5 SRM

HISTORICAL
2.0-5.0 SRM



PALE LAGER/INTERNATIONAL LAGER

2026 TARGET
2.0-3.0 SRM

HISTORICAL
4.0-7.0 SRM



HAZY IPA

2026 TARGET
2.5-4.0 SRM

HISTORICAL
5.0-7.0 SRM



WEST COAST IPA

2026 TARGET
2.5-4.0 SRM



What This Means for Brewery Operations

Low-color beers reduce margin for error.

Breweries moving into this space often need to:

1. Rework flagship recipes instead of layering new seasonals
2. Run pilot batches specifically to test color drift over time
3. Tighten raw material specs in purchasing contracts
4. Coordinate sourcing more carefully across warehouses to avoid substitution

Inventory planning becomes critical. When a beer depends on a narrow malt spec, “close enough” no longer is.

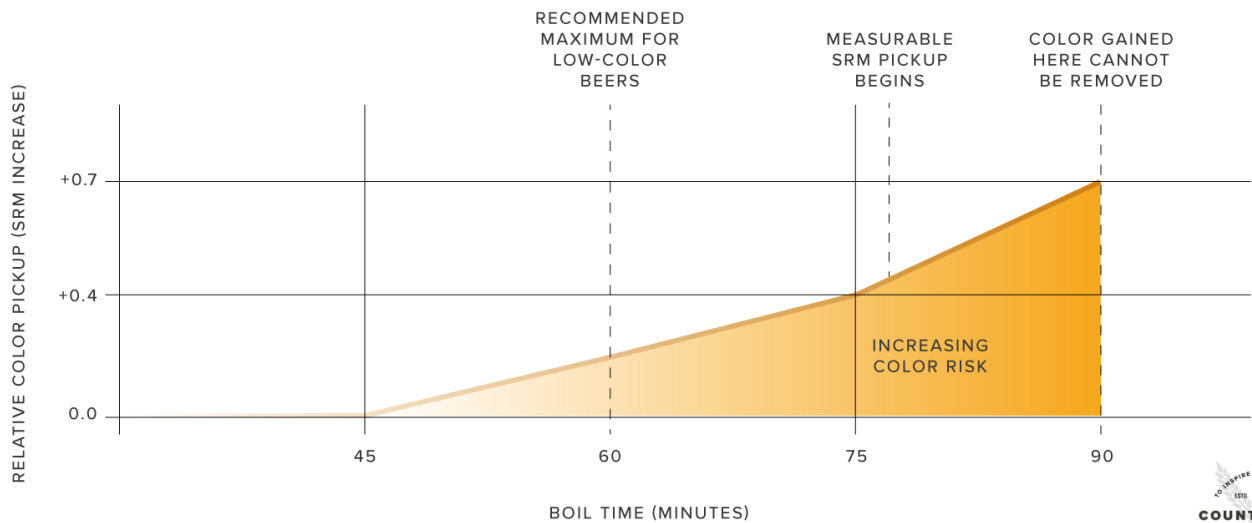
Practical Ingredient Checklist

For breweries actively brewing or planning low-color beers:

- Base malt with verified sub-2.5 SRM consistency
- High extract, high fermentability targets
- Yeast with proven clean performance at scale
- Hop strategy focused on balance and efficiency
- Process controls for oxygen, pH, and clarity
- No single ingredient solves this alone.

COLOR RISK MAP: WHERE PALE BEERS ARE LOST

LONGER BOIL TIMES INCREASE BEER COLOR EVEN WHEN USING VERY PALE MALT





Our Perspective as an Ingredient Supplier

Across regions, the same questions keep surfacing.

Brewers ask how low they can push color without losing body. They ask why two batches look different using the same recipe. They ask why a beer that tastes fine still “looks wrong” on draft.

The pattern is consistent. Low color magnifies everything upstream. Ingredient choice becomes less about preference and more about tolerance for variation.

That is why this trend matters now, not later.

PALE STRAW
STRAW
PALE GOLD
DEEP GOLD

BRIGHT BEER SELLS *FASTER*

WHY BREWERS ARE TIGHTENING SRM TARGETS AND WHAT IT CHANGES UPSTREAM

Trend → Ingredient Readiness

Low-color beers are not a niche experiment anymore. They are shaping how recipes are written, how ingredients are specified, and how consistency is judged. Breweries that treat color as a primary constraint adapt faster. Those that don't usually end up reformulating twice.

Talk with your CMG [sales representative](#) to plan your first Low-Color pilot and select the right ingredient set for your system. Start the conversation early to secure consistent low-SRM malt and align your process before scaling the recipe.