Draft Systems 101: Understanding KeyKegs

Last month, we took a quick but detailed look at the nuts and bolts of your basic draft system. We covered the six main components at play in any pint of draft beer you've ever drunk: cooler, keg, gas, coupler, tubing, and faucet. But not all kegs work the way I described—especially not if they came from the Lime Ventures price book. Today, we'll dissect the KeyKeg, the misunderstood vessel in which many of our beers (especially the imports) are packaged.

What are they?
They KeyKeg is a funky type of keg that only travels one way. Instead of shipping a keg from a brewery to an importer to a distributor to a retailer and back again, it is simply recycled after it's emptied at the tap. This saves retailers the trouble of having money tied up in keg deposits, distributors from having to ship empties all around the world, and breweries from having to track down and clean their extremely costly cooperage. Proponents even tout one-way kegs as better for the environment thanks to a lighter shipping weight the lack of return shipping.

Rather than being made of stainless steel like a traditional keg, KeyKegs are made from plastic and cardboard. A bag containing the beer lives inside a big plastic ball, which is housed inside a vaguely keg-shaped cardboard box, all of which is then wrapped in a stabilizing layer of plastic.

There are now also "slimline" KeyKegs available to brewers, which forego all the cardboard and exterior plastic in favor of a slim, more traditionally keg-shaped plastic "ball."

How do they work?
As you might have gathered, these don't work quite like regular kegs. There's no spear, which means the beer doesn't come up from the bottom of the vessel, and your dispensing gas never comes into contact with the liquid. Instead, with the help of a proprietary coupler (nope, you can't just use your regular old Sankey coupler, or your similar-looking European G System coupler), gas flows into the plastic ball surrounding the bag o' beer to squeeze it from the keg to the faucet.

In this system, gas never comes into contact with the beer. This means that the type of gas you use to pour a KeyKeg doesn't really matter. If you want to use cheap compressed air, it won't contaminate or oxidize the beer like it would in a normal keg. Even in setups that use bottled carbon dioxide, this system lowers the risk of contamination to some degree. Further, you don't risk flattening or overcarbonating your keg with improperly applied carbon dioxide pressure (similarly, you can't *add* carbonation to beer in KeyKegs either, so let's trust that the keg leaves the brewery with enough bubbles).

In some circumstances, a well-tuned KeyKeg setup requires some extra equipment to operate at its best. As I mentioned before, you must tap KeyKegs with a special, proprietary coupler. That's where it ends for most customers--plug in their fancy new coupler and everything works great. That said, KeyKegs require a bit more applied pressure than most kegs, so if you're serving them on a system with other, non-Key kegs, you might need secondary gas pressure regulators to control the differing pressures for every draft line. If you *do* have the ability kick up the pressure on just your KeyKeg lines, you can cause foaming problems if the beer is pouring too quickly. When that happens, additional resistance from the draft system is needed—this might mean longer beer lines or a flow-control faucet to pour KeyKegs without foaming issues.

Breweries from all over the world are embracing the KeyKeg for the positives they offer to their customers, the environment, and their own companies. Thankfully, they are easy to use once you've got your system prepared for them.

The only other major difference from a typical stainless steel keg is what to do with the KeyKeg once it's empty. All parts of the vessel are recyclable, so it's really just a matter of getting the thing broken down. First things first: you're dealing with a highly pressurized plastic ball, so don't just go stabbing at the thing with a knife. You'll need to find the red de-gassing tool that came with your KeyKeg coupler. By fitting that tool onto the valve at the top of the keg and twisting it clockwise, the pressure within the ball is released. Then, you can remove the plastic and cardboard shell around the ball and step on it to make it more compact for recycling. Remove and save your de-gassing tool, and chuck all the rest of that stuff in the bin. Here's a video if you're into visuals.

Troubleshooting
Even if your system is perfectly dialed in, it's possible to still have issues with foamy KeyKegs. As with any system, the keg needs to be completely chilled and settled before tapping. If you're still having issues, make sure that you have both enough gas pressure going to the keg, and enough system resistance to keep it from coming out of the faucet too quickly.

If problems persist, you might have a keg that has continued fermenting after packaging (make sure you keep those kegs cold! We do!). If you are sure everything else is set up properly, KeyKeg offers some tips on how to relieve excess carbonation here.