

What is “Living Beer?”

You may have seen it on a beer bottle: “This beer is alive!” “This is a living product!” “Contains live yeast!” It’s true—many of the beers you encounter at the bottle shop are indeed living. But don’t expect some kind of Toy Story-esque reanimation to happen when you close the refrigerator at night—the life of a living beer is a fairly boring one.

What do you mean, it’s alive?

When brewers say that a beer is alive, they’re saying that there is some population of living yeast that remains in the bottle after packaging. You’ll most frequently run into this in bottle-conditioned beers. These are beers that are carbonated naturally, through a re-fermentation within the sealed bottle. Just before the brewer caps or corks the bottle, the beer is dosed with a small amount of sugar, which yeast consume to generate carbon dioxide and alcohol. Because the bottle is sealed, there’s nowhere for the carbon dioxide to escape and it is absorbed into the liquid as carbonation. Once all the dosing sugar is consumed and the beer is carbonated, the yeast settle to the bottom of the bottle.

What about kegs and casks?

Bottle-conditioned beers aren’t the only lively ones, though—there can be living yeast in kegs and casks as well. These products have undergone the same basic process of conditioning, just in a much bigger vessel. The difference is that these vessels are poured from the bottom first. This means that yeasty sediment will be the first thing that comes out of the keg or cask, and the beer behind it will flow bright and clear.

What about *non*-living beers?

Most of the beers you’ll see in stores are *not* living. These beers are usually filtered to remove living organisms and are carbonated through a process known as “force carbonation.” This is when the brewer applies pure, bottled carbon dioxide pressure to the beer until it is absorbed by the liquid. The result is a product with extremely precise levels of carbonation and, as a result, less risk to the brewer.

Why is it important to have naturally-conditioned, living beer?

Living beers have a few advantages over their non-living counterparts. First, the abstract: living beer is traditional and pays respect to a long history of natural carbonation in beer. Some also believe that natural conditioning produces a finer bubble and thus a more pleasing mouthfeel in the final product. The extra fermentation also uses up any of the oxygen that remains in the bottle due to the imperfect nature of the packaging process. The result is a beer less prone to the off-flavors associated with oxidation and more likely to improve in the bottle over time. As a bonus, the living yeast contain a healthy dose of energizing B vitamins!

These advantages have made many brewers life-long proponents of living beer—these are the guys that proudly state it on their bottles: “this beer is alive!”