

## Article

# The Growth in Demand for Craft Beer and the Proliferation of Microbreweries in Slovenia

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**Abstract:** The craft brewing industry is in a constant state of evolution. Over recent years, the craft beer sector has experienced rapid growth, and this trajectory is expected to persist. Microbreweries, in contrast to traditional industrial beer production, actively encourage the exploration of diverse beer styles, embrace the trend of championing local and regional ingredients, and maintain a strong focus on quality while resurrecting historic beer varieties. An analysis of interviews conducted with microbrewers in Slovenia featured in Slovenian daily newspapers revealed recurring categories that shed light on the drivers behind this flourishing artisanry. These findings are further discussed in the context of the existing scientific literature. Notably, a range of factors were identified as contributing to the growth of this sector. Among these factors, the desire for distinctive, authentic, locally rooted, and non-standardized flavours, styles, and ingredients, often accompanied by an inspiring and compelling brewer's or creator's narrative, played a pivotal role in attracting consumers. These results can inform microbrewers production, distribution, marketing, and pricing strategies. They are also relevant to the country policymakers supporting local hops production and local brewing.

**Keywords:** craft beer; demand; microbreweries; interviews; beer market; growth; variety of tastes; production; marketing; multinationals



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## 1. Introduction

The global unification of available beer offerings, driven by the concentration of producers, created a vacuum that was quickly filled by smaller, independent producers offering a diverse array of tastes and styles. As multinational corporations consolidated their hold on the beer market, a trend emerged towards uniformity and mass production worldwide. This led to an era where beer choices often seemed limited, with a few dominant brands overshadowing other possibilities. However, this trend inadvertently paved the way for a countermovement led by craft brewers. These passionate artisans, often starting with modest operations, saw an opportunity to fill the void left by standardized beer. Their ethos centred around creativity, quality, and a celebration of the diverse range of flavours that beer could embody. Craft brewers capitalized on their ability to experiment with ingredients, techniques, and styles that had been largely overshadowed by mass-market offerings. The result was a resurgence of unique and innovative beers that catered to a growing audience hungry for variety. These brewers tapped into the desire for authentic, locally made products that carried the essence of their origins, challenging the uniformity propagated by larger conglomerates. The expansion of craft beer showcased that there was a market beyond the established norms. Beer enthusiasts were eager to explore tastes that were once considered niche or unconventional, appreciating the craftsmanship and dedication that went into each small batch creation. This shift not only revitalized the industry but also fostered a sense of community among consumers who sought out these distinct brews. In essence, the concentration of global beer production inadvertently set the stage for a renaissance in brewing. Similar developments occurred in Slovenia as well. Smaller producers, unburdened by the pressures of mass production, harnessed their

passion and ingenuity to craft beers that celebrated diversity, complexity, and individuality. This movement not only provided consumers with a broader spectrum of flavours to enjoy but also demonstrated the power of independent innovation in an industry previously dominated by conformity. The aim of this research is to examine key factors driving the strong growth of the craft beer market and movement in Slovenia.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Craft brewers and their clientele have completely revolutionized the worldwide beer landscape. They put an end to a century-long trend of brewery consolidation, which had led to the dominance of a handful of multinational corporations and the standardization of beer. Starting out on a small scale and operating independently, they eventually reshaped the entire global industry. Their anti-establishment movement, challenging the stranglehold of macro brewers and their uniform beer offerings, brought about a transformative shift in the global beer panorama [1].

For decades, the Slovenian beer market bore the unmistakable stamp of a single brewery that wielded its influence through two prominent brands: Laško and Union [2]. These names had become synonymous with beer in the country, their labels adorning the shelves of stores and the menus of local pubs. For many years, the collective palates of Slovenian beer enthusiasts were accustomed to the flavours and nuances of these familiar brews, creating a sense of nostalgia and tradition. In this landscape, foreign beer brands struggled to gain a foothold. Their presence was limited, a mere fraction of the market share, as the deeply rooted connection between Slovenians and their local beer options held steadfast. The flavours that danced upon Slovenian taste buds were distinctly local, intertwined with cultural experiences and shared memories [3].

However, a significant shift occurred in 2015, a change that would resonate through the heart of the nation's beer culture. Pivovarna Laško, the brewery that had held the reins over the Laško and Union brands, was acquired by the international beer giant Heineken [4]. This acquisition was a turning point that rippled through the landscape, marking a departure from the era of sole dominance. The transition brought with it a blend of anticipation and apprehension. As the global footprint of Heineken cast its influence, there was curiosity about how the flavours and identities of the beloved local brands would evolve under this new umbrella. The tastes that had long defined Slovenian beer preferences stood at a crossroads, navigating a juncture between heritage and global expansion.

With this shift, a window opened for foreign brands to inch their way into the consciousness of Slovenian beer lovers. While still maintaining a relatively modest market share, these international contenders began to challenge the longstanding status quo, offering new dimensions of flavour and diversity. The once unquestionable allegiance to local brews found itself facing a gentle erosion, as curiosity and a desire for variety prompted beer drinkers to explore the broader spectrum of options available. It has already been proven that the diverse range of imported beers indeed aids local small-scale producers in managing the growing competition [5,6].

In terms of volume, beer stands as the most widely consumed alcoholic beverage globally [7,8]. According to the latest data from the Statistical Office of Slovenia, an average resident of Slovenia consumes slightly over 26 litres of beer per year at home. In 2021, Slovenia exported beer worth almost 44 million euros, with the largest portion—almost one-third—going to Croatia. The majority of Slovenia's beer imports also came from Croatia, accounting for 38% of all imports. The value of beer imported from Croatia reached slightly over 32 million euros. In Slovenia, there were 68 breweries operating in 2021, nearly five times as many as in 2008. During this period, the retail sales revenue from beer increased by 27% to almost 196 million euros. Last year, the average retail price per litre of beer was 1.93 euros, as reported by the statistical office ahead of this year's International Beer Day on Friday [9].

### 3. A Bit of History

The history of beer traces back through the annals of time, intertwining with the evolution of human civilization and culture. Its origins can be found in the distant past, an intricate tapestry woven with grains, water, and the ingenuity of our ancestors. Until recently, it was believed that the practice of brewing beer dated back 5000 years [10].

However, Liu et al. [11] challenged this notion by utilizing use-wear and residue analyses on three stone mortars discovered at a Natufian burial site in Raqefet Cave, Israel. Their findings indicated that the Natufians utilized at least seven different plant taxa, including wheat or barley, oats, legumes, and bast fibres like flax. They stored plant-based foods, including malted wheat/barley, in containers made from fibres, which were then placed in boulder mortars. Bedrock mortars were used for the preparation and cooking of plant-based foods, including the brewing of wheat/barley-based beer, likely served during ritual feasts around 13,000 years ago.

One of the earliest vestiges of beer's creation can be glimpsed in the ancient societies of Mesopotamia, where Sumerians etched clay tablets with cuneiform script that referenced the art of brewing [12]. These early brews were a fusion of malted barley and water, fermented naturally by the wild yeasts present in the environment [13]. Beer, in its primitive form, was not only a beverage but a vital source of sustenance and a medium for social exchange. As the centuries unfolded, the secrets of brewing were passed down, enriched by the contributions of different cultures. Around 5000 BC, the brewing process was initially documented by the ancient Egyptians on papyrus scrolls [14]. Egyptians revered a goddess of beer, and in ancient China, millet and rice were transformed into early forms of fermented beverages. The monastic traditions of medieval Europe nurtured the refinement of brewing techniques, as monks meticulously cultivated yeast strains and experimented with various botanicals to create complex flavours.

The introduction of hops, a flowering plant prized for its bittering and preservative qualities, revolutionized brewing in the Middle Ages [15]. This innovation not only extended the shelf life of beer but also imparted a distinct aroma and bitterness that became a hallmark of many traditional beer styles. Monasteries and local artisans perfected regional recipes, giving rise to diverse beer cultures that reflected the ingredients available in their respective landscapes. The Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought about mechanization and mass production, shaping the beer industry into a global force [16].

This era saw the establishment of large-scale breweries that harnessed technology to produce consistent, standardized beers. Lager, a cold-fermented beer style, gained prominence during this time, further altering the landscape of brewing. However, even as industrialization spread, a countermovement was stirring. The late twentieth century witnessed the emergence of the craft beer renaissance, a resurgence of small-scale, artisanal brewing [17].

This movement celebrated the roots of brewing, embracing traditional methods and experimenting with a wide array of ingredients. Craft brewers sought to recapture the diverse and complex flavours that characterized beer before its industrialization. Today, the world of beer is a vibrant tapestry that weaves together a rich historical legacy with contemporary innovation. From ancient Mesopotamia to the bustling craft breweries of the twenty-first century, beer's journey has been one of evolution, adaptation, and creativity. It reflects the spirit of humanity's ingenuity, our desire to transform humble ingredients into a beverage that transcends time and culture, uniting us in the shared enjoyment of its diverse and ever-evolving flavours.

Due to mass industrial production, lager is undoubtedly the most widespread type of beer in the world. The modern style of lagers originated in the second half of the nineteenth century in Germany and the Czech Republic. A lager can be pale or dark, and it is distinctive in that it is brewed and then matured at lower temperatures, hence it is also referred to as a bottom-fermented beer [18]. Both of the most sold brands of Slovenian

industrial beer are pale lagers, as well as the most well-known product of their Dutch owner and countless global beer brands.

Ale is a type of beer brewed and matured at higher temperatures, placing it among top-fermented beers; other well-known styles of such beers include wheat beer, porter, and stout, the most famous example of which is the iconic Irish Guinness. Ale beers come in numerous variations, with pale ale or light ale probably being the most widespread. Just like with light lagers, unroasted malt is used for its production [19]. Today, the India Pale Ale style is highly popular among craft brewers; in regular pale ales, significant amounts of hops began to be added in the nineteenth century to endure the long journey to the former British colony of India, hence its name. Ale beers possess a more pronounced flavour (compared to lagers), often reminiscent of various fruits, and for styles with roasted malt, also notes of chocolate, coffee, and similar flavours [20].

The designations “microbrewery”, “craft brewery”, “local brewery”, “artisanal brewery”, “independent brewery”, and “specialty brewery”, are occasionally employed to characterize breweries that have recently initiated the production of distinct types of beer on a smaller scale. This sets them apart from larger breweries engaged in mass-producing beer, many of which have operated for over a century and navigated the consolidation trends of the twentieth century [1]. Following the inception of the “taste revolution” [21,22] in the United States during the 1970s, a growing multitude of small craft beer producers garnered popularity among consumers, including in Europe [23,24]. In Europe, craft-brewed beers are not a novelty in countries with a rich brewing history like Germany, Belgium, the UK, and the Czech Republic. However, the situation differs for other nations.

#### 4. Literature Review

Assessments of beer quality and individual preferences are subjectively perceived and encompass multidimensional aspects. Studies focusing on the impact of packaging aesthetics on consumer perceptions of food and beverages reveal that packaging attributes significantly contribute to capturing attention and shaping expectations regarding perceived quality [25,26]. The primary attributes of beer quality encompass its visual appearance, aroma, taste, and mouthfeel [27]. Conducting a sensory evaluation presents a complex challenge, requiring adaptable approaches to discern distinctions and variations among beers. This practice finds widespread application in breweries, maintaining consistent product quality and verifying the integrity of diverse raw materials (such as water, malt, and hops). Moreover, it serves to mitigate the impact of the production process on the ultimate beer quality [28].

Hernández-Mora et al. [29] conducted a literature review delving into the diverse quantitative and qualitative methodologies employed in consumer studies pertaining to beer consumption. Their analysis spans from conventional methods like acceptability, purchase intention, and preference to more advanced techniques that offer deeper insights into consumer perception and behaviour. The review covers innovative applications such as immersive technologies, virtual reality, implicit measures, as well as contemporary trends within consumer science, including the influence of the Internet, social media, pairing, and product experience. Authors [29] confirm that among the most prevalent and potent means to comprehend human behaviour remain interviews and focus groups.

The unification of beer flavours by major consolidated producers and the expansion and dominance of global brands in the market, together with the stagnation of consumption, are already evident in the increasing demand for craft beer and, simultaneously, the decreasing sales of established brands [30]. Amidst declining sales of their beer brands over the past decade, major brewers have faced accusations of “craftwashing” from certain craft brewers and their enthusiasts [31,32]. This practice is characterized by large brewers capitalizing on the growing demand for craft beer. They achieve this by either replicating these products or acquiring craft breweries, all the while concealing their ownership from consumers.

Based on the ad hoc survey conducted in Italy, the findings indicate that among various profile elements, such as young consumers, the capacity to assess and recognize quality, as well as the frequency of consumption, play a pivotal role in shaping preferences for consuming craft beer. Additionally, supporting local beer producers, enjoying quality time with friends, and perceiving beer as a healthier option in comparison to other beverages also hold significant importance [33].

Researchers in the United States recently conducted an experimental within-subject comparison about a phenomenon called neolocalism to assess customers' expectations, perceptions, and satisfaction regarding the taste of a locally brewed craft beer in comparison to a mass-produced craft beer. The findings revealed that customers had higher expectations for the local craft beer, but their satisfaction levels were greater when it came to the non-local craft beer [34]. Findings from another study suggest that perceptions of neolocalism have a notably positive impact on the quality of relationships, with this quality subsequently influencing both place attachment and brand attachment in a positive manner [35]. Taylor et al.'s research suggests that taproom sales could provide a competitive edge for local microbreweries in comparison to competitors who prioritize distribution as their primary approach. This strategy allows small local microbreweries to distinguish themselves both from each other and from larger breweries [36].

There are many different types of beer in the world, and in Slovenia, we are only at the beginning of discovering the beer-drinking culture that has existed elsewhere for a long time. It is not just lagers that we have mostly been accustomed to here for a while. We are in a period of introduction and exploration of new beer flavours. Slovenia has a population of two million, which constitutes a moderately sized city in some parts of the world. According to the fairly accurate data from the PivoMan blog [37], there are 22 microbreweries, 50 homebrewers, 11 nomadic brewers, 31 pub breweries, and 2 industrial breweries operating in Slovenia in 2023. Additionally, there are 54 former breweries. From The Brewers of Europe [38] data, Slovenia produced 2,231,000 hectolitres of beer in 2021, which represents 0.65% of beer produced in EU27. A comparison of the population of the countries shows that Slovenia represents 0.44% of the EU27 population. Hops in Slovenia cover around 1% of agricultural land. Hop cultivation in Slovenia represents a significant portion of global production, accounting for 2.1%, placing Slovenia, in 2018, fourth in Europe, after Germany, the Czech Republic, and Poland; sixth worldwide, following the USA and China (among more than 21 hop-producing countries across all five continents). Slovenia exports 99% of its hop yield, which is primarily used for beer production [39].

Based on the review of theoretical foundations and acquired data, an intriguing research question emerges: What are the key factors driving the strong growth of the craft beer market and movement in Slovenia? To explore these developments and endeavour to answer this question, we opted to perform a content analysis of interviews with microbrewers that were published in Slovenian daily newspapers.

## 5. Methods and Materials

Derived from positivist beliefs in objectivity, content analysis offers a method to acquire data for quantifying the occurrence and diversity of messages [40]. Content analysis transforms the frequency of specific symbols into summarized assessments and content comparisons within the discourse [41]. In this research, we analysed prominent daily newspapers as the corpus for examination.

### 5.1. Sampling and Data Collection

Before methodically selecting articles that would comprehensively represent the craft beer and microbrewery phenomena in Slovenian newspapers, we thoroughly reviewed and analysed all available news related to these two keywords (kraft pivo and mikropivovarna) through a Google search. Subsequently, articles featuring interviews with craft beer producers, sellers, and customers were selected for inclusion in the final sample. The time frame in which we covered the content of the articles is between 2015 and 2023. In the newspaper

review, we found 45 relevant interviews related to the topics (out of 73 identified articles), which were conducted with owners or business partners. A total 24 of interviews were used in the article to avoid duplicating the content (the same interviewees giving similar information in more interviews) by eliminating interviews that referred just to statistics, events, or beer retailers.

## 5.2. Analysis

In Table 1, what follows is a summary of the 24 cases analysed with breweries' characteristics.

**Table 1.** Breweries presented in interviews.

Brewery	Establ.	Place	Website
Lobik	2016	Ruše	<a href="https://lobikbrewery.com/sl/domov/">https://lobikbrewery.com/sl/domov/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Matt	2017	Stara Cerkev	<a href="https://lobikbrewery.com/sl/domov/">https://lobikbrewery.com/sl/domov/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Reservoir Dogs	2008	Solkan	<a href="https://reservoir-dogs.beer/">https://reservoir-dogs.beer/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Human Fish	2008	Vrhnika	-
Crazy Duck	2017	Žiri	<a href="https://crazyduck.si/">https://crazyduck.si/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Kralj	2017	Dobova	-
22brewing	2018	Sv. Anton	<a href="https://www.22brewing.com/">https://www.22brewing.com/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Adam Ravbar	1991	Domžale	<a href="https://www.pivnica-adamravbar.si">https://www.pivnica-adamravbar.si</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Tektonik	2015	Ljubljana	<a href="https://www.tektonik.beer/">https://www.tektonik.beer/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Pelicon	2013	Ajdovščina	<a href="https://www.pelicon.beer/">https://www.pelicon.beer/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Barut	2017	Kamnik	<a href="https://www.barutbrew.com/">https://www.barutbrew.com/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Maister	2014	Komenda	<a href="https://maisterbrewery.com/">https://maisterbrewery.com/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Pod Menino	2016	Tuhinjš	<a href="https://www.meninc.si/">https://www.meninc.si/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Mali Grad	2010	Kamnik	<a href="https://pivovarna-maligrad.si/">https://pivovarna-maligrad.si/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Feo	2015	Kobarid	<a href="https://pivovarnafeo.si/">https://pivovarnafeo.si/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Green Gold	2016	Šempeter	<a href="https://www.greengoldbrewing.com/">https://www.greengoldbrewing.com/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Mali grad	2014	Šmarca	<a href="https://pivovarna-maligrad.si/">https://pivovarna-maligrad.si/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Loo-blah-nah	2016	Ljubljana	<a href="https://looblahnah.com/en">https://looblahnah.com/en</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Tektonik	2015	Ljubljana	<a href="https://tektonik.beer/">https://tektonik.beer/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Lintvern	2014	Bohinjska Bistrica	<a href="https://www.lintvern.si/#">https://www.lintvern.si/#</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Vizir	2008	Črnomelj	<a href="https://vizir.si/en/">https://vizir.si/en/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Bevog	2017	Radkesburg	<a href="https://bevog.si/">https://bevog.si/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Castra	2013	Črniče	<a href="https://www.castra.beer/">https://www.castra.beer/</a> (accessed on 4 September 2023)
Fomo	2022	Črnomelj	-

Except for identifying specific details like the newspaper, date, interviewee, and interviewer, the articles were read without predefined or rigid categories to determine relevance. There are two prevailing models of brewery ownership: family and friends. Sometimes a combination of both. The education and experiences of brewers vary greatly; among them, one can find a former oil worker, neurologist, photographer, mathematician, economist, electrical engineer, Doctor of Biotechnology, bartender, and manufacturer of equipment for the wine and beer industry. Without exception, all of them are passionate beer enthusiasts who enjoy experimenting, exploring uncharted paths, and are not afraid of new challenges.

Our prior research and familiarity with the theoretical framework provided us with tools for observation and analysis. Our general approach involved reading a few articles, evaluating their key elements, and then establishing broad categories for the article and cross-referencing with previous ones. Subsequently, we assessed the quality and quantity of information recorded, considering omissions and segments deemed irrelevant for the present focus. This iterative exploration and comparison refined our sampling procedure and guided data collection. The categories that emerged from this process were as follows: quality and variety, local and authentic experience, innovation and creativity, small batch production, direct-to-consumer sales, cultural shift and beer education, social media and marketing, support for local economy, counterculture and anti-establishment appeal, food pairing and culinary trends, and taxation of beer production.

## 6. Results and Discussion

The expansion of craft beer and microbreweries in Slovenia has been driven by a variety of factors that have contributed to their growing popularity and success. Here are some of the categories, which represent the key reasons for the expansion of the craft beer movement (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Key reasons for the expansion of the craft beer movement in Slovenia.

Categories Mentioned in the Interviews	by the No. of Interviewed Brewers
Quality and Variety	23
Local and Authentic Experience	22
Innovation and Creativity	12
Small Batch Production	19
Direct-to-Consumer Sales	17
Cultural Shift and Beer Education	14
Social Media and Marketing	10
Support for Local Economy	9
Counterculture and Anti-Establishment Appeal	6
Food Pairing and Culinary Trends	6
Taxation of beer production	5

### 6.1. Quality and Variety

Craft breweries prioritize the quality and flavour of their beers. They often use traditional brewing methods and high-quality ingredients, resulting in unique and diverse flavour profiles. This emphasis on quality and variety has attracted consumers seeking a departure from mass-produced, standardized beers. Quality (quality water, quality ingredients, quality control, quality standards, quality level, and constant quality) was discussed 42 times in the interviews and 33 times about varieties (sour beer, IPA, single hop, pale ale, porter, English ale, Belgian ale, gold ale, lager, stout, and Trappist), often together.

Zarič [42] argues that “Quality is more important than packaging”, while Mišmaš [43] says that “The craft beer segment is young and still experiencing growing pains. It is similar with the quality, it’s quite relative, but it increases with time and the quantity of brewed beer in an average small brewery”. In small breweries, the focus is on quality and the creative development of new recipes. With each brewing, they aim to improve and inspire as many people as possible with the new wave of beer. They often participate in competitions and proudly use the awards they receive for advertising, as they serve as evidence that they are on the right path.

Practically all microbrewers say that at the beginning, quite a few litres go down the drain. Komel [44] reveals that “When transitioning to our own brewery, we retained two batches of beer that didn’t completely meet our quality standards”. Usually, enthusiasts

engage in reading various books and websites, and there has been a lot of learning through practice—there are numerous courses both abroad and in Slovenia. Experiences also play a significant role; when you have been involved in brewing beer for several years, you gradually become an expert in the field of beer brewing.

“The essence of craft beer lies in attempting to reach two or three thousand litres based on your own homebrew recipe and maintaining the level of quality. However, there’s a massive difference between brewing 50 litres of beer and 2000” [45]. Marko Jamnik [46] admits that he is still learning and still adjusting recipes, but he aims for the quality of beer from his brewery to be consistent: “But in the end, we are craft brewers, and we don’t have such a perfectly controlled production like large breweries”. When an enthusiast starts to seriously consider the idea of transitioning from homebrewing to a more commercial brewing platform, dealing with significantly larger quantities, the question of how to start and with which beer styles the brewery will enter the market quickly arise. The investment in equipment is far from negligible, so careful consideration is necessary. The capacity that might seem enormous at the beginning can quickly become a limiting factor for success in the market. Sometimes surprises are also possible when it comes to flavours. What the brewers and their friends like may not necessarily be in line with the taste of the target audience. Maintaining quality at a high level and offering a consistent product is also important.

### 6.2. Local and Authentic Experience

Craft breweries often have a strong focus on their local communities. They offer a sense of authenticity and a connection to the region in which they operate. This emphasis on local culture and identity resonates with consumers who appreciate the story behind the beer and its ties to the community. There are 50 mentions of local (local ingredients, local environment, local beer, local offer, local juniper, brewery of local nature, local specialties, local recipes, local bars, and local products) and authentic (authentic beer offer and authentic design) in the interviews.

“Local microbrewers have caused the circle of potential customers to expand and have contributed to the elevation of the culture of beer knowledge and consumption” [44]. The research conducted by Craine et al. [47] revealed that an impressive 83% of respondents indicated their willingness to pay a higher price for beer to assist local farmers. This value proposition offers a chance for consumer spending to provide vital support to producers, who play a crucial role in the craft malt and beer value chain. Their economic prosperity will ultimately shape the sustainability of small farms in less prominent agricultural areas.

Berkvens [48] says that “I believe that if a global multinational corporation acquires a local brewery, most customers lose interest in that beer because they perceive it as the microbrewery now being part of a multinational entity”. Urban Florjančič [46] states that “Just as the name of the brewery, the label design of our brewery is also locally inspired. The figure on the label comes from the legend of Veronika of Kamnik, the countess of Mali Grad”.

The study by Fletchall [49] affirms that beyond the beer’s flavour, the local identity of breweries and their emphasis on community engagement emerge also as significant attractions for brewery visitors. This enables them to immerse themselves more genuinely in the local community and provides an avenue to forge a genuine bond with the location, underscoring the potential for establishing a meaningful sense of place. This research underscores how craft breweries have evolved into crucial contributors to the process of creating a sense of place.

“There is more experimentation with flavours, making it easier to cater to the preferences of beer enthusiasts. Even the ingredients are more traceable than before, with a greater emphasis on local specialties. We are also following this trend. This year, we harvested wild hops for the first time, which we intend to use in our new beer. For special batches, we will be adding herbs gathered from the surroundings, as well as forest fruits” [50].

Alfeo et al. [22] discovered that the craft brewing industry in Sicily exhibits significant reliance on the import of malt, hops, and yeast, while brewers demonstrate limited utilization of local raw materials. Another study revealed evidence of synergy between the origins of brewing and hops among frequent craft beer consumers, while indications of interchangeability between these aspects were observed for occasional drinkers [51].

### 6.3. Innovation and Creativity

Craft breweries are known for their innovative and experimental approach to brewing. They constantly push the boundaries of brewing techniques, ingredients, and styles, creating new and exciting flavours that capture the interest of adventurous beer enthusiasts. Innovation (innovative brewing, innovation, innovative concept, innovative flavours, and innovators) as a theme was discussed 7 times and creativity (creative versions, creative ideas, creativity, and creative cuisine) 5 times.

Komel [44] explains that “We age one series of beers in barrels at the winemaker Aleks Klinc in Brda. Through a special process, we poured the beer onto the lees of the wine—these are organic sediments that formed after the wine had been in the barrel for five years. Now, the second batch of this bottled beer is coming to the market. It’s a more complex line of sour beers, with mixed fermentation, bacteria, and various yeast strains. The second beer, on the other hand, is a fresher summer sour beer, made in the German gose style with Piran salt and local juniper”. Mišmaš [43] points out that “New styles and brews are always in the brewer’s mind, and they come to life in winter when time allows for creativity”. Craft breweries possess the flexibility to create unique, experimental, or seasonal beers initially and, subsequently, determine whether a new beer should be included in their regular lineup based on feedback from consumers. This trait is a significant feature of numerous craft breweries [52].

Marko Jamnik [53] argues that “The advantage of the new taproom we have is precisely that we can immediately offer innovative flavors to customers and record their reactions. If they like the beer, we include it in our regular offerings”.

The exploratory research conducted by Erhardt et al. [54] exposes the conflicting dynamics between experimentation, authenticity, and independence inherent within a socially oriented overarching culture, juxtaposed with mass production, geographic expansion, and corporate collaboration aimed at economic advancement. Their findings emphasize the significance of operating at a local scale to effectively navigate non-local economic expansion while reconciling the demands of profit-driven business goals with the aspirations for long-term sustainability and societal value.

Lazar [55] reveals that “The Central European Brewers Conference (CEBC) is renowned as a gathering of the finest Central European craft breweries. In the 2019 beer competition, the title of the best beer among craft beers was awarded to Black Aurora beer from the pioneering Slovenian brewery Pelicon [...] Black Aurora beer is brewed using only one variety of hops, specifically the Styrian Aurora variety, which was developed in the 1970s at the Institute of Hop Research and Brewing in Žalec, Slovenia. This institute has so far developed seventeen Slovenian hop varieties. Additionally, there are six new varieties currently being tested for potential inclusion on the hop variety list. Brewers describe Styrian Aurora as having an elegant bitterness, pleasant aromas, and high popularity”. According to Reid et al. [56], the surge in craft beer’s popularity, notably from the early 2000s onward, has led to substantial shifts in hop demand. The researchers underline three pivotal alterations: heightened hop demand, an appetite for diverse hop varieties to accommodate various styles, and an inclination toward locally sourced hops.

Ogrinec [57] claims that “In the last year and a half, many breweries specializing exclusively in the production of sour beer have emerged. Interestingly, this venture has been undertaken not by microbiologists but by brewers themselves. This gives us a slight advantage, as we, being scientists in this field, have a relatively good understanding of how these processes work. Hence, we can even delve into exotic practices such as brewing beer exclusively with wild yeast strains, which can be quite challenging. Proof that this approach

is successful is evident in our type of beer winning at domestic brewing competitions in both Slovenia and Croatia". Bossaert et al. [58] validate the current surge of interest in sour beers, witnessing a growing number of breweries embracing sour styles and experiencing a steady uptick in sales. The production of sour beer offers breweries a plethora of avenues to explore in crafting novel beverages and expanding their product range.

#### 6.4. Small Batch Production

The term "microbrewery" implies small-scale production. This allows craft breweries to be nimble and responsive to changing consumer preferences. It also enables them to produce limited-release or seasonal beers that can generate excitement and demand. Small quantities (production quantity, amateur production, limited space, production large enough to sell, limited quantities, smaller quantities, and recipes for small quantities) are mentioned 36 times in the captured interviews.

Mišmaš [43] says that "It is important to produce good and high-quality beer while staying within the quantity limits that will still allow for it". While Florjančič [46] conveys that "The (almost) every brewer's desire is, in fact, to open their own taproom alongside the brewery, a place where they can sell all their products, including those that, due to limited quantities or unique flavours—usually, the latter accompanies limited quantities—will never reach a wide range of customers". There is a study [59] which indicates that the production of craft beer on a small scale is deeply ingrained in a specific sociocultural environment, shaping various aspects of production and marketing. This connection to place and community is evident in multiple dimensions, including collaboration to surmount challenges and the incorporation of sustainability principles. The study delves into the concept of terroir, or the taste of place, within the context of craft beer. It highlights the emergence of "social terroir", where the ties between individuals and their communities play a pivotal role in crafting beer. This underscores the role of small-scale food production and culinary endeavours in fostering connections between individuals, locations, and enterprises.

Guzelj [60] asserts that "The recipes are even adapted for home equipment, for production in a quantity of 25 litres, so that anyone can brew any of their beers they like at home". The findings of an interesting study by Kraus et al. [61] demonstrate that craft breweries are participating in coopetition through various strategies. Coopetition is driven by factors like mutual benefit, trust, commitment, and sympathy. On the other hand, coopetition leads to shared outcomes such as innovation development, market expansion, marketing strategies, and overall business growth.

#### 6.5. Direct-to-Consumer Sales

Many craft breweries sell their products directly to consumers through taprooms, brewpubs, and online platforms. This direct interaction with customers fosters a sense of community and allows breweries to establish a loyal customer base. Ways of selling craft beer (taproom, retail, local bars, guided brewery tours, online store, home delivery, beer festivals, and events) are discussed 46 times.

Oblak [62] explains that "On the shelves of small or large shopping malls, there is a limited amount of space, which means that not all providers can easily reach potential customers anymore". The research conducted by Palardy et al. [63] demonstrates that larger craft breweries benefit from having access to grocery stores, whereas smaller breweries encounter notable logistical challenges.

Anja Florjančič [64] thinks that a very important milestone was redirecting from distribution through an intermediary—which they acknowledge was good—to our own delivery. "There's undoubtedly a difference if your products are sold by someone who also sells other beers, or if it's done by someone from the company. That's why we hired a salesperson in 2017. Sales have significantly increased, and we also have direct contact with customers". Baiano [65] concurs that craft beer finds its primary consumption in restaurants and bars. Craft beers are frequently unfiltered and unpasteurized, which results

in beverages containing abundant healthful compounds; however, this characteristic also contributes to a shorter shelf life.

Charlesworth [66] is convinced that “Direct sales are ideal. There’s no one between us and the customers, the beer is fresh, and of course, with direct sales, we also earn more”. To remain competitive, craft beer producers strive to secure profits by developing specialized consumer products distributed via platforms like farmers markets, direct sales, and collective initiatives aimed at accessing broader market prospects within the value chain [63].

#### 6.6. Cultural Shift and Beer Education

There has been a cultural shift toward valuing quality over quantity, and consumers are increasingly interested in learning about the production process and the nuances of different beer styles. Craft breweries often engage in educational events, festivals, tastings, and tours that cater to this interest. This theme is discussed 16 times.

Before the Second World War, Slovenia had a highly developed brewing and beer culture with numerous microbreweries in all regions. “Almost every slightly larger town had a brewery. Sometimes, wine wasn’t accessible to everyone since not everyone had a vineyard, but anyone could brew beer at home”, explained Iztok Jože Košir [46] from the Institute of Hop Research and Brewing. After the Second World War, in the communist Yugoslavia, most of these breweries disappeared or were shut down because they were privately owned [46]; “Throughout those years, we lost the brewing culture, both as beer enthusiasts and as brewers”. Drinking culture is our internal relationship with ourselves, with fellow humans, and with the environment. If we have this organized, then there is no need to worry about where we will find the boundary that separates us from stepping over the threshold of what is permissible and appropriate. Cultural drinking thus means choosing the right moment, which includes the time, place, and justification for the action of reaching for a glass of exquisite beer.

Srebot [67] says that “They have created a very loyal audience for the English style and thus also made a certain shift in the entire Slovenian craft beer scene”. Březinová [68] conducted a study on the motivations behind establishing craft breweries, revealing that Czech brewers are primarily driven by a desire to enhance the beer culture within the country. Additionally, the increasing demand for diverse beer options (in contrast to the demand for typical Euro-beers) and the promising business prospects associated with this trend have attracted a growing number of investors to this sector.

Račič [69] mentions that “The organizers of the Craft Beer Week event announce that a variety of events related to the culture of enjoying craft beer will take place throughout the week”. Jamnik [46] declares that “The online portal Pivopis.si is not just a gathering place for beer enthusiasts; they also organize education and tastings”. When practicing mindful drinking, a cultured drinker never forgets the effects of alcohol. Cultured means that they are well versed in the drinking culture, aware that determining the right amount lies within themselves. To achieve this, we need proper heart education from home, starting with our families and entire environment. We should be informed about how life functions and how we interact with it. Only through an understanding based on a culture of the heart and an awareness of everything we do in life can we regulate the inner alarm that alerts us when it is enough. Learning to drink is necessary, just like learning to drive a car, and any events dedicated to this purpose are welcome.

Andrej Colarič is the sole cicerone or a kind of beer sommelier in Slovenia [70]. He states that “This is an organization that awards certificates in the field of beer. There are three levels. The first, basic level can be completed online and is a prerequisite for serious education. The second level, which I have completed, is much more demanding as you have to take the exam in London, where a very broad knowledge of beer is assessed. There are around two thousand people worldwide who have completed the second level. The third level, completed by only 11 people, is for individuals who have been in brewing for 30 years, have their own breweries, and are deeply integrated into the world of beer”.

Education for beer connoisseurs is a crucial aspect of fostering the development and advancement of beer culture. This educational endeavour holds the potential to significantly enhance our understanding of beer properties, their harmonious pairing with various dishes, and much more. It can help to enhance the beer knowledge, promote responsible consumption, foster culinary exploration, support local breweries, leverage cultural enrichment, elevate the brewing community, create business opportunities, and encourage continuous learning.

Sluga [71] discloses that “The Association of Slovenian Breweries has prepared the BeerPass project, which we presented on International Beer Day. It brings together fifteen breweries from all over Slovenia: Clef, Crazy Duck, Green Gold, Lobik, Loo-Blah-Nah, Maister, Pivovarna Maribor, Reservoir Dogs, Reset, Tektonik, Time, Union, Vizir, Zajc, and the Institute for Hop Research and Brewing of Slovenia. It’s a kind of guide that leads beer enthusiasts to breweries across Slovenia, allowing them to sample small beer samples and get acquainted with beers of different styles”.

The BeerPass and similar projects can be likened to a treasure map for beer enthusiasts, beckoning them to embark on an exhilarating journey across Slovenia’s landscapes and vibrant beer culture. Such projects could entail brewery exploration, sampling variety, beer education, cultural exchange, supporting local breweries, fostering community, promoting tourism, celebrating diversity, etc. In sum, the BeerPass project represents a dynamic and inclusive initiative that not only enriches the beer culture in Slovenia but also offers a delightful and educational experience for beer enthusiasts. It is an invitation to embrace local craftsmanship and embark on a voyage of flavour exploration.

#### 6.7. Social Media and Marketing

Craft breweries have effectively leveraged social media and digital marketing to promote their products and engage with customers. This has allowed them to reach a broader audience and create a strong online presence. 12 times this context is mentioned (social networks, Facebook, web, mobile, marketing, advertising, word-of-mouth, and sales promotion).

Smolnikar [72] claims that “The media image of microbrewing underwent a significant transformation when the first brewed craft beer, HumanFish, entered the market in 2008. Suddenly, there was widespread talk about craft beers, even though you and other microbrewers had already been in the market for seventeen years. Social media and current trends contributed the most to this change”. Interesting research [73] showcases how the utilization of social media cultivates a communal storyline that involves both producers and consumers in the realm of artisanal products and their principles. Recognized as vital participants within the craft beer community, stakeholders encompass craft brewers, retailers, bloggers, and enthusiasts. The study employs methods like interviews, ethnographic studies, focus groups, and public events to uncover insights. The results contribute to enhancing future interactions that can reinforce the bond between small, artisanal industries and their consumer base.

Imširović [74] explains that “We contemplated how to approach promoting beer sales given that we don’t have as much capital as large brewing conglomerates, but we do have some experience in the cryptocurrency field. For our own beer brand, FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) Brewery, we created a cryptocurrency called Bottlecap. The concept is that the more beer sold under our brand, the higher the coin’s value will be”. Similar attempts, using blockchain, have been noticed in other countries too, e.g., to inform beer lovers about craft breweries’ supply chain for an easier assessment of beer quality and as a blockchain-based discount coupon systems [75,76].

Luka Rojnik, hop grower and brewer, argues that [77] “For someone who prioritizes the appearance of packaging over the quality of beer, they are not a true beer enthusiast in my view”. A study [78] conducted surveys among craft beer enthusiasts, categorizing them into two consumer groups based on their preferences for beer packaging: the “traditional” consumers, who favour the conventional glass bottle, and the “innovative” consumers,

who are more open to packaging innovation, such as aluminium cans. Notably, these two groups exhibited varying degrees of preference concerning beer clarity, colour, bitterness, and body. Across both samples, taste intensity emerged as the primary attribute influencing beer evaluation. This underscores that consumers, even when presented with canned beer, are capable of assessing and appreciating the aromatic and quality aspects of the product. Although glass remains the preferred packaging material for craft beer consumers, there is an increasing acceptance of canned packaging among traditional consumers. Consequently, breweries might consider focusing on canned product lines to leverage the inherent logistical and marketing advantages.

#### *6.8. Support for Local Economy*

The growth of microbreweries contributes to job creation and economic development within local communities. This support for the local economy further enhances the appeal of craft beer. The researchers came across 13 mentions related to this topic (economic reasons, employment, community, self-employment, connecting people, and local sources).

From the interviews, we can gather that microbreweries in Slovenia have between 3 and 14 employees. Matthew Charlesworth, the owner of HumanFish Brewery, now has three employees and is occasionally assisted by up to seven students. They brew an average of 125,000 L of beer per year [66]. The findings from the study on the craft beer value chain as a means of economic development conducted by Miller et al. [79] indicate that state governments could foster economic expansion by cultivating a business environment that supports the development of the local beer value chain. Argent's [80] study highlights the inclination of craft brewers to promote local and regional progress, and for a minority of them, to craft beers using locally sourced ingredients to the greatest extent possible.

During the fermentation process, beer must not come into contact with oxygen, as it can oxidize and ultimately develop a cardboard-like taste, says Oblak [62]. "This doesn't happen to the big players. At Union, where the entire process is automated, 15 people oversee it. In Human Fish, which produces thousands of times less beer, there are five employees"; Oblak illustrates the differences, which are ultimately also reflected in the price variations. As already argued by Argent [80], the ability of craft breweries to generate local employment serves as a significant gauge of their economic and social integration within the community.

In Slovenia, there is practically no craft brewery where women do not have a hand. Anita Lozar from Pelicon Brewery explains [81] that "There are many of us who brew beer in pairs or communities. If a guy was brewing beer at home, we would help. It's true that now I'm more involved in administration because we are a family business, but Matej and I look for solutions together when it comes to recipe composition and technology". The analysis conducted by Kuehn and Parker [82] shows that out of New Zealand's 194 documented 'craft breweries,' only 15 are owned by women. Additionally, at least five of these breweries have joint ownership with husbands or male partners. In Wilson's [83] study, it is demonstrated that brewery workers display a heightened connection to their jobs, referred to as "pure passion", which encompasses various aspects such as labour, consumption, and lifestyle practices. However, these expressions of pure passion are rooted in privileged social attributes related to race, class, and gender. Consequently, this cultural framework of work ends up reinforcing the dominant position of white, middle-class men within the industry, while simultaneously marginalizing the experiences of women and people of colour.

#### *6.9. Counterculture and Anti-Establishment Appeal*

The craft beer movement emerged as a response to the dominance of large, corporate beer companies. Many consumers are drawn to craft beer as a way to support independent businesses and reject mass-produced, homogenized products. This context (anti-globalism, anti-establishment, localism, and anti-uniformity) was discussed in 6 interviews.

Polenčič [84] says that “One of the most resonant deals in the last decade was the sale of Pivovarna Laško. The company also owned the only major Slovenian breweries, which are now in the hands of the Dutch global giant Heineken. Now, Slovenian microbreweries, which have been springing up like mushrooms after the rain, will be competing against the big players”. Today, the five largest global breweries control half of the world beer market. As of 2022, Anheuser–Busch InBev held the dominant share in the global beer market, representing close to a third of total beer volume sales. Anheuser–Busch InBev, the worldwide frontrunner in beer production, manufactures well-known beer labels such as Stella Artois, Beck’s, Corona, and Budweiser. Following behind were Heineken and China Resources Snow Breweries, with respective market shares of 13.6 percent and 6.5 percent [85].

Mergers of large companies and their acquisitions of smaller ones have led to increasingly uniform flavours. Global breweries operate like other industries, with profit as their main motive. Large brewers seek tastes that will be liked or at least acceptable to both Americans, Slovenians, and Chinese; the result is beers at the lowest common denominator. Beer, of course, is much more than just profitmaking. Therefore, while uniformity was occurring on one side, a craft brewing revolution was unfolding on the other. Smaller craft breweries are striving to cater to the tastes of those who do not appreciate a standardized beer flavour. They are catering to seekers of the new, the different.

Gerčar [86] argues that microbreweries represent the desire of a growing number of people, both producers and consumers, to reconnect with the environment they live in. The rise of small breweries against the larger ones is seen as a “sentiment against globalization”.

#### 6.10. Food Pairing and Culinary Trends

Craft beer has become a staple in the culinary world, with beer pairings becoming increasingly popular in restaurants. The complex flavours of craft beer can complement and enhance various dishes, further boosting its appeal. Gastronomy and craft beer pairing (the demand for accompanying food, pretzels, hamburgers, haute cuisine, pairing, local cuisine, combining food and beer, traditional food, local cuisine, combining food and beer, any food, dessert, and the pub) is often discussed—25 times.

Once, it was believed that only pretzels and stale peanuts were suitable companions for beer, which were typically placed on the table in an average bar. Nowadays, burgers are a popular choice to accompany beer. Hipsters are often credited for this trend, but beer enthusiasts are convinced that the connection between burgers and beer is a stereotype. “With beer, you can enjoy any kind of food. In fact, it’s the other way around—you can find a beer that pairs well with any food”, assures Davor Mišmaš [46]. He recommends a light German beer with a chicken salad, Belgian beers with fish, or herbal beers that can replace tartar sauce. There is even a beer that pairs well with desserts, perhaps something Belgian with a cherry flavour. Mišmaš [46] adds that “Beer doesn’t lag behind wine when it comes to food pairing, sometimes even surpassing it. Spiciness, for instance, is one of those aspects that wine sommeliers highlight as a drawback in wine, while beer, due to its bubbles and sweetness, can better complement spicy cuisine”. In their 2021 literature review, Rune et al. [87] examined methods for identifying favourable food and beverage pairings, and they concluded that the majority of pairings relied on expert recommendations related to popular/common, similar origin, or beverage and food quality aspects.

Mišmaš [46] further argues that “When it comes to top-tier restaurants around the world, the trend of having a beer menu has been fashionable for some time. Lighter beers, such as Belgian wheat beers, pair well with appetizers, and with each course, you continue and intensify the flavours. Here’s another example: a general rule is that grilled dishes go excellently with beers brewed with roasted malt and smoked beers. For each dish, you can find a beer that complements and enhances the taste of the food. [...] Alongside a chocolate cake, kriel beers are an excellent match. These are fruit beers with added cherries, creating a similar taste to having chocolate-covered cherries soaked in alcohol in your mouth”. Certain destinations offer craft beer and food tours, for example, New Hampshire

Passport Craft Beer and Food [88], with suggestions for pairings of selected brands and dishes, while Eschevins et al. [89] proposed a comprehensive model for pairing food and beverages, encompassing both wine and beer. Fifteen pairing principles were discovered, representing various strategies and prerequisites to be considered when creating a match.

According to Pelicon [90], “beer is a highly versatile beverage for pairing with food. The easiest pairing is beer and dessert, for example, a dark stout with chocolate foam, but this is still a fairly unexplored territory. Stouts go well with poultry, like grilled chicken. Belgian dark beers pair incredibly well—you won’t believe it—with Slovenian potica. Bock beers are best suited for fatty foods. To cleanse your palate after fatty dishes, you need acidity or a high alcohol content, and having both together even better neutralizes the taste”. While Lozar [90] adds that “If you’re asking about our beers: for our summer ale, where we added ginger and coriander, it pairs well with Kranjska sausage, as both have a slight spiciness. Summer ale also goes well with sushi or fish. For The 3rd Pill, which is an Indian pale ale characterized by bitterness, we recommend all spicy dishes, as well as olives and olive oil, such as a salad with Istrian Belica cheese”. Authors often mention good combinations of craft beer and desserts [91,92].

Tekavec [93] argues that “We are one of the few breweries that don’t just sell beer. In the coming years, gastronomy will be the main theme of Slovenian tourism. [...] As an example of a tasting, guests are greeted with beer bread made from pale ale and beer-infused savory dough, somewhat similar to pretzels, served alongside cheese. We are considering partnering with specific producers to promote products and produce from the Kočevje region from a tourism perspective”. The literature frequently explores gastronomy and food tourism in conjunction with craft beer, highlighting the potential for development, employment, social practices, the economy, and more [59,94,95].

#### 6.11. Taxation of Beer Production

In 2016, a 50% reduction in excise taxes for microbreweries was achieved in Slovenia. This price difference did not lead to a decrease in the final price of beer for consumers; instead, it served as an investment in breweries and their workforce. Consequently, many breweries were able to enhance or expand their equipment, hire new personnel, optimize distribution, and undertake similar improvements. The interviewees discussed excise taxes, tax relief, and tax burden 13 times.

Jamnik [46] said, in 2015, that “In the realm of home brewing, Slovenia stands as an exception once again: you can legally purchase all the ingredients for beer yet brewing it without paying excise duty is prohibited. Slovenia is one of the few countries that imposes excise duty on beer even if it’s brewed for personal use at home. In other words, untaxed spirits can be distilled for personal use, and wine can be produced for personal consumption, but for every liter of kitchen-brewed beer, a portion must be contributed to the state, regardless of whether you intend to share it only with friends at a summer picnic. Many beer enthusiasts believe that this is the case because lawmakers are slow to catch up with real-life developments”.

According to the Excise Duty Act, the basis for excise duty on beer is the alcohol content per hectolitre. Excise duty is paid at a rate of 12.10 euros per 1% alcohol by volume per hectolitre of beer. A small beer producer is an individual who has produced a maximum of 20,000 hectolitres of beer in the previous calendar year and pays 50% of the amount in excise duty. For beer produced for personal use, there is no requirement for registration, calculation, or payment of excise duty. Beer is considered to be produced for personal use if it is made and consumed by an individual along with household members, and the quantity produced in a calendar year does not exceed 500 L [96].

The act was only adopted in August 2016; prior to that, all beer producers, even if they brewed it solely for personal use, were required to pay full excise duty, while wine or brandy producers did not have this obligation. This was due to the fact that, until then, only big breweries dominated the scene. So, it is no surprise that this was one of the reasons

that inhibited the development of microbreweries, since they were taxed on a par with large companies.

Oblak [62] argues that “A serious craft brewery will require a significant investment ranging from 500,000 to one million euros, but even that often isn’t enough. The leap from brewing 50 to a few thousand liters of beer is akin to the difference between cooking spaghetti for kids or catering an all-day feast for restaurant guests. The only real incentive for small brewers is a 50% lower excise duty up to 20,000 hectoliters”. The decrease in excise taxes indeed facilitated the operations of small brewers, yet it did not bring about substantial changes, given the considerable investments required for equipment and development.

The factors elucidated from the above categories, among other elements, have played a pivotal role in the growth and sustained appeal of craft beer and microbreweries. As a result, they have emerged as a substantial and influential segment within the beverage industry. Their ability to cater to consumers’ desires for distinctive, authentic, locally rooted, and non-standardized flavours, coupled with the compelling narratives of the brewers themselves, has solidified their position in the market. This niche approach, which prioritizes quality and storytelling, has not only contributed to their commercial success but has also enriched the overall beer culture and diversity of offerings available to consumers.

## 7. Conclusions

To answer the posed research question, it has to be said that the most important reasons for the growing demand for craft beer in Slovenia are the evolving knowledge of beer drinkers, the increasing desire for variety, more distinct tastes of customers, perceived quality, and disdain for the increasingly unified tastes of globalized brands.

As it can be seen from the literature review [25–28], perceived quality consists of several dimensions; it is subjective, and as the lager varieties prevail, it can be supposed that the demand for craft beer will never exceed the demand for conventional types in Slovenia. Although the market share of craft beer is growing, microbrewers will take advantage of the market niche opportunities but will not dominate the market.

Further on, another important element that influences importantly the rise of microbrewers in Slovenia is the desire for local, which could be mixed not only with local patriotism but also ethnocentricity. Localism has been thoroughly researched by authors in other countries [34–36] and the findings from Slovenia support their conclusions. As Taylor Jr [34,35] suggests, tastings and taprooms contribute to the brand loyalty, customers satisfaction, and experience excellence.

When we summarized the interviews, it was clear that the beginnings of dealing with microbrewing are mainly based on enthusiasm. The transition to serious production is difficult and large investments are required. The support of friends and family is important. There is a lot of experimentation, creativity is required, and connection with the local environment is desirable. Consistent maintenance of a constant quality level is also a potential issue. Distribution after the transition to larger quantities of production is a challenge and the solutions are different, but definitely appearing at events and having your own taproom helps.

From the comprehensive analysis of the interviews conducted with craft brewers, it becomes evident that there are several positive trends indicating the potential for further growth and development of microbreweries in Slovenia. These trends are reflective of an increasing demand for craft beer in the country and a positive image of artisan production. Consumers appreciate the diversity of craft beer flavours and the innovation and creativity of microbreweries, and they are willing to pay a bit more for real quality. An increasing number of festivals, events, and organized experiences are being arranged to introduce people to new craft beer flavours and pair them with various food options. Craft beer festivals and events serve as vibrant platforms for microbreweries to showcase their creations. Attendees have the chance to explore a wide array of beers from different producers,

engaging in conversations with brewers and fellow enthusiasts. These gatherings foster camaraderie and contribute to the growth of the craft beer culture.

The distribution channels utilized by microbreweries are deliberately designed to be straightforward and accessible, promoting a mindful drinking culture and forging personal connections between producers and consumers. Microbreweries often establish strong relationships with local pubs and taprooms. These establishments become key distribution points for the brewery's products. They provide a cozy and social atmosphere where patrons can enjoy a diverse range of craft beers while interacting with knowledgeable bartenders who can offer insights and recommendations. This setup encourages direct interactions between brewers and beer enthusiasts, increasing a sense of community.

Many microbreweries sell their products directly to consumers at their brewery or taproom. This approach not only allows visitors to sample the latest offerings but also provides them with an opportunity to learn about the brewing process, tour the facilities, and meet the passionate individuals behind the beer. These on-site experiences enhance the connection between the brewery and its patrons. Microbreweries often collaborate with local retailers and bottle shops to ensure their products are readily available within the community. This partnership supports the local economy and offers consumers the convenience of purchasing craft beer close to home. With the advancement of e-commerce, some microbreweries expanded their reach by offering online sales and home delivery services. This approach allows consumers to access their favourite craft beers even if they cannot visit the brewery in person, further strengthening the bond between brewers and their loyal patrons.

Marketing and promotion strategies within the craft beer industry primarily rely on personal interactions and word-of-mouth recommendations. Bartenders in local pubs play a pivotal role in introducing customers to new and unique craft beer flavours, often sharing their insights and personal favourites. Additionally, craft breweries gain recognition and visibility through articles in newspapers and magazines, which serve as informative pieces highlighting their distinct offerings and brewing philosophies. One significant aspect of craft beer marketing is the recognition and accolades received at various beer festivals. Winning awards at these festivals not only boosts a brewery's reputation but also piques the interest of enthusiasts and potential consumers. These accolades serve as testaments to the quality and craftsmanship of the beer, attracting curious drinkers looking to explore new and exciting flavours. Unlike conventional advertising methods, such as television or radio commercials, craft beer producers tend to invest less in traditional advertising tools. Instead, they prioritize building a strong presence within their local and niche communities, fostering a sense of authenticity and uniqueness that resonates with their target audience. This approach creates a genuine and intimate connection between brewers, consumers, and the craft beer culture, emphasizing the craft and artistry behind each brew.

Craft beer enthusiasts seek more than just alcoholic intoxication; for them, every sip represents a unique experience and a delightful journey into the intricate nuances and subtleties of their beloved beverage. They hold a deep appreciation for the passionate and artisanal craftsmanship that brewers pour into their creations. Hence, it becomes imperative for breweries to effectively convey the authenticity, local essence, quality ingredients, and other vital aspects of their offerings to resonate with these discerning consumers. This mutual understanding between brewers and craft beer aficionados forms the foundation of a thriving and vibrant craft beer culture.

Certainly, there are several intriguing avenues for future research in the realm of craft beer and microbreweries such as the following suggestions. Consumer behaviour and preferences: investigate the evolving preferences of craft beer consumers, exploring factors that influence their choices, such as taste, packaging, branding, and the impact of localism. Economic impact: analyse the broader economic implications of the craft beer industry, including its contributions to local and regional economies, employment generation, and the financial viability of microbreweries. Sustainability practices: examine the sustainability practices adopted by microbreweries, including water usage, waste management, and

energy efficiency, and their impact on environmental and social sustainability. Cultural significance: explore the cultural aspects of craft beer, including its role in shaping local identities, fostering community bonds, and its integration into gastronomic experiences and tourism. Global perspectives: compare and contrast the craft beer movements in different countries, identifying commonalities and unique regional characteristics. These research directions can contribute to a deeper understanding of the craft beer industry, its multifaceted impact, and the evolving preferences of consumers, ultimately aiding both researchers and practitioners in this dynamic field.

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