National sales of craft beer grew 10.3 percent in 2009, despite the fact that overall beer sales in the United States fell by 2.2 percent, according to figures released Tuesday by the Brewers Association.

The growth during the recession-hampered year was even stronger than the 10.1 percent sales jump that small, locally owned breweries saw from 2007 to 2008, the Boulder-based association noted. And it came at a time when imported beers in particular felt the sting of the economic downturn, as sales of foreign-produced beer fell by 9.8 percent throughout the country last year.

Local brewers cited several reasons for the jump in sales even as the country's largest brewers, such as Denver-based Molson Coors as well as Anheuser-Busch, saw sales dip. For people who can no longer afford a luxury vacation, the ability to treat themselves to a tasty local beer for just a few dollars more is a reward they still can afford, said Todd Usry, Breckenridge Brewery director. Also, at a time when large corporations are laying people off and becoming less relatable to average Americans, craft breweries are still seen as a local product.

U.S. craft brewers had $6.9 billion in sales in 2009 that represented an estimated 9.1 million barrels. In comparison, overall U.S. beer sales fell from approximately 210.4 million barrels to 205.8 million barrels in 2009.

Craft beer sales continue to be just a small percentage of American beer sales, representing 4.3 percent by volume, but the number is rising, Brewers Association officials said.

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