

Tiny Bubbles: Local Sodas

From Seattle to Portland soda gets a fresh and sometimes seasonal start

By Liz Crain

Americans drink more than 50 gallons of soda a year per capita, making soda one of the biggest sources of calories in the American diet. What started out as a bubbly treat meant to mimic the naturally effervescent water of mineral springs, and served at soda fountains in the early 1800s, has become a ubiquitous national beverage and an industry behemoth.

Although only a handful of soda companies dominate the market, in recent years smaller soft drink entrepreneurs have launched unique products, many of which are healthier alternatives to the high-fructose-corn-syrup (HFCS) sweetened, chemically engineered sodas that so many Americans drink daily.

The Pacific Northwest—particularly Seattle and Portland—is swimming in such alternatives.

The fine bouquet of a bottle of soda

Wine, beer, and spirits are often known for details such as the alluvial soil that produced the grapes or hops, or the oak barrel that aged the whiskey, but when is the last time you drank soda that touted much beyond sweet and fizzy?

Since 2005, **Hot Lips Soda**, based in Portland, Oregon, has been brewing soda with local, seasonal farm-fresh fruit and serving it on draft at Portland-area Hot Lips Pizza restaurants. Several of their sodas are even brewed exclusively with fruit from particular farms such as Ayers Creek Farm blackberries, Skeeter Farm blueberries, and Ford Farms apples.

These all-natural, cane sugar-sweetened sodas quickly became so popular that the company decided to bottle them for retail sales. In January, Hot Lips partnered with

Dundee Fruit Company in McMinnville, Oregon and their bottled soda is now in restaurants and markets throughout the Pacific Northwest.

According to Hot Lips president David Yudkin, "What we're doing in terms of fresh fruit really has not been done on any kind of scale for decades, so we had to reinvent the process. We hand-machined some of the parts and tracked down retired people from soda companies who had some memory of having seen something like this in the past. So it's been a huge adventure reinventing something that we consider to be a lost art."

Dry Soda, based in Seattle, also got its start in 2005 with slightly sweet, subtly

flavored sodas including lavender, kumquat, lemongrass, and rhubarb. Whereas Hot Lips Soda's Yudkin is considering crafting a local seaberry soda (tart orange berries from a perennial shrub) Dry Soda founder and CEO Sharelle Klaus is keen on the possibility of producing both basil and juniper berry sodas.

Klaus was disappointed with the slim selection of sophisticated, alcohol-free drinks while she was pregnant, so she decided to create one herself. Dry Soda's HFCS-free, gourmet, bottled sodas are now available in more than 20 states.

Klaus practically pops with soda-pop enthusiasm, "Carbonated soft drinks are the highest per capita (consumed) beverage in the United States and so it is beyond time for innovation. I get so excited when I look around and see the innovation that Starbucks did with coffee, how they changed the way we drink coffee to a much more highly roasted coffee. And I love what's happened with tea and bottled water.

"But there's very little innovation in terms of carbonated soft drinks. I believe wholeheartedly that we are moving into an area where obviously everything is going to have to be all-natural, and I think beverages have to reflect our modern palate. There shouldn't be a ton of ingredients in them, and they need to be highly evolved. You also can't put high fructose corn syrup in them—not just because it's bad for you but because it truly doesn't taste good."

Simple sweeteners

In the last few years studies of the often ominous health implications of consuming HFCS have led to developments in alterna-



Northwest artisan soda-makers are increasingly producing HFCS-free drinks in distinctive flavors for health- and taste-conscious consumers.

CAMERON NAGEL PHOTO

tive sweeteners—particularly in the soda industry. Many American soda companies are making the switch to pure cane sugar even though pound for pound it costs significantly more.

Jones Soda based in Seattle, considered the grand-daddy of American alternative soda, eliminated HFCS from their soda and switched to cane sugar at the beginning of 2007.

Although Jones Soda is a multi-million dollar public company selling roughly six million cases a year to companies such as Starbucks, Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and Target, they started small. In 1996 they took a unique marketing model to unlikely soda venues such as tattoo shops, skate stores, and surf and snowboarding shops, providing the businesses with special Jones Soda emblazoned coolers from which they could sell Jones Soda. Today they produce more than 20 distinctive flavors (including everything from blue bubble gum to crushed melon) smacked with labels printed with customer submitted photographs.

Derek and Jessica Newman, co-founders of Seattle-based soda company **Zevia**, never even considered brewing an HFCS soda for the market. In 2005 the couple joined forces with their friend Ian Eisenberg to create Zevia—the first diet soda to use stevia, a natural herb sweetener.

The drive to start a natural soda company was extremely personal, according to Jessica Newman. "A couple years ago I was living an otherwise healthy lifestyle—eating well, exercising a lot, I had just had babies and was breastfeeding them. I even ran marathons, but I was also drinking a ton of diet soda. We had a friend who was using stevia in his oatmeal and beverages. We learned that it was a natural tabletop sweetener and we were just really curious as to why it wasn't in a soda product yet."

Zevia is now available in 10 states, although mainly in the Pacific Northwest with three canned flavors (cola, orange, and twist) and more to come.

Old school

In America in the 1700s mineral spring waters, with natural effervescence ranging from light to heavy carbonation, were all the rage. In the 1800s the advent of commercial soda fountains that added fizz on demand, popularized soda. And then in 1892, when the crimped metal bottle cap was patented, a tidal wave of packaged soda flavors and brands followed.

Thomas Kemper Soda Co., although young by these standards, is the oldest existing soda company in the Pacific Northwest. The first handcrafted Thomas Kemper root beer was brewed in 1990 as an alternative to the beer that the then Thomas Kemper Brewing Company was serving at their Oktoberfest in Poulsbo, Washington. The sodas were so popular that a separate company was formed, and today their sodas are still available throughout the West Coast.

The company, now based in Portland, has recently undergone some major changes. Their low calorie sodas (root beer, ginger ale, and black cherry) made with Splenda® (sucralose) and Pacific Northwest honey hit the shelves in April and in late spring or early summer Thomas Kemper sodas will make the switch from HFCS to cane sugar.

Crater Lake Soda, the newest Pacific Northwest soda company on the block, is fueled by a history of homebrew. According to founder and sales and support director Curt Gouverneur, a retired laser optics design engineer as well as a former brewmaster, soda came naturally since he's brewed it since he was a kid with his dad.

"I mean, we had a fridge in the basement that was dedicated to nothing but soda so we were always brewing it, bottling it, and keeping it in the cellar."

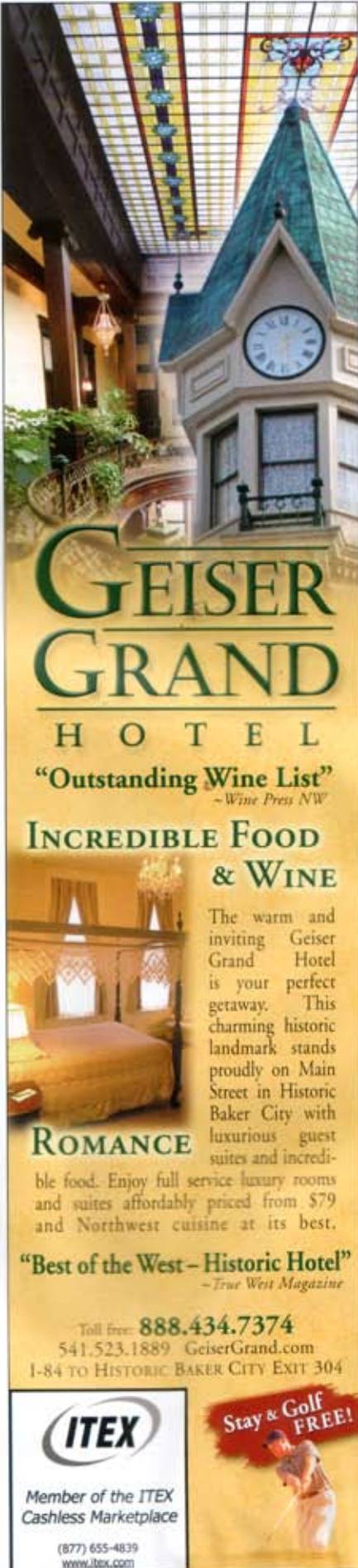
This is one back-to-basics reason why Crater Lake Soda is adamant about keeping their soda as natural as possible with no HFCS and no artificial foam enhancers.

According to Gouverneur, "Foam enhancers came into effect during Prohibition because beer has a natural foam enhancer, which is the hops, and people wanted that same look with root beer as a replacement for beer. Well, it's become such an industry norm that we now have some places that won't take our root beer because we won't put it in."

So if you like your soda simple and natural, you can make your own at home with minimal equipment—like Gouverneur still does from time to time with his children. But if you live in the Pacific Northwest you also have plenty of delicious, HFCS-free, natural, alternative sodas ready to bubble you up. And lucky for you some are even made from local herbs and farm-fresh fruits, and most are sweetened with pure cane sugar, honey, or stevia.



Writer Liz Crain is a food- and soda-loving freelancer based in Portland, OR.



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