

Ginger Ale's Irish Roots

by Ken Previtali

Ginger ale was the No. 1 soft drink in America for over seventy years, beginning its vast popularity around 1860. In fact, the U.S. soft, drink industry really began in earnest with this flavor, and the manufacture of a quality ginger ale was the measure of a bottler's whole line. By 1893, the importance of ginger ale in the beverage industry was unquestionable and W.B. Keller (editor of *National Bottlers Gazette*) made this remark: "...it should be the aim of every bottler to bring its brand of ginger ale to the highest possible perfection, since a bottler's products are often judged for better or worse by the merit or lack of merit possessed by its ginger ale."

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The best informed historians attribute the invention of ginger ale to the Irish in the 1850s. However, as with most of history, there is another point of view: Robert Robinson of New York City claimed he was the first one to make ginger ale in the U.S. in the 1840s, calling it ginger soda. By all accounts it was more like the "gingerades" being made in England at that time, rather than the ginger ale "flavor" produced in Ireland. Nobody really knows, but it is likely that Dr. Cantrell in Belfast was the first inventor of ginger ale- perhaps with Grattan & Company, also of Belfast as a party to the earliest production of the beverage. Grattan proudly claimed the rights by embossing a slogan on its bottles: "The Original Makers of Ginger Ale." Possible, but not provable.

Original Flavor Decidedly Different

Early ginger ales would not be recognizable to modern palates. By most descriptions, few bottlers made ginger ale worth drinking by today's standards. Even in 1888, Charles Sulz, a highly respected master chemist of the early beverage trade, said "...it is an unfortunate fact that a great deal of American ginger ale is 'miserable stuff,' in many instances nothing more than sweetened water." (American ginger ales did evolve well beyond that description but it took many years to accomplish.)

The most common sin was the overuse of capsicum (hot red pepper) to achieve the "bite" that the right amount of genuine

ginger provided. We can assume that the cheaper, lower quality bottlers employed capsicum to avoid the expense of ginger. Here are the results of such practices, as described by J.T. Norman, an English competition judge, in 1896: "...ginger ales should not be hot lemonades heavily doused with capsicum; the chief palate characteristic should be a clean pure ginger flavor, not attained with capsicum. In competition, beverages which erred on the side of fiery flavor were relegated to their proper position, near the bottom."

Quality Flavor: An Elusive Achievement

Ginger ale making was considered an art. I think it would not be amiss to say

that even today, a good ginger ale is a work of art. Some current offerings contain upwards of 400 ingredients, most of which make their appearance under the heading of natural flavorings. Early ginger ales contained extract of ginger and essences of lemon, rose and ginger oil. Reputable bottlers used just a trace of capsicum. Depending on local tastes, some formulas also included various fruit essences and spice tinctures. The Irish "Belfast" types possessed a fine aroma, which Americans tried to copy with varied success. Belfast flavorings included ginger root, orange peel, nutmeg, vanilla, cinnamon and sometimes capsicum.

Eloquent descriptions by the writers during the period 1880-1930 suggest that ginger ale flavor was revered, like that of fine wine. Discussions of imported vs. American, pale dry vs. golden, and aromatic vs. fruity were common among both consumers and bottlers. However, it was generally agreed that crisp flavor, brilliant clarity and appropriate pungency were paramount to success. In any case, creating quality ginger ale was difficult and few mastered the skill.

The early years of ginger ale were tumultuous times, full of battles over bottles, import duties on foreign ginger ales, exploding bottles, sanitation problems, inconsistent flavor sources, fountain equipment miseries, and delivery troubles. (Remember, these were the horse and buggy days, and when loaded with crates of filled bottles, delivery wagons often met with roadside disasters.) Yet ginger ale survives today as a steady seller in national and regional markets, a remarkable feat when you consider the number of flavors that never made it at all.

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About the Author:

Ken Previtali has been collecting ginger ale history and bottles for fifteen years. He and his 900 ginger ale bottles live in Danbury, CT.

Photo: From the collection of Kathy Hopson. Early Vernor's Ginger Ale embossed bottle.

