

GINGER BEER and ROOT BEER HERITAGE

by Donald Yates

Ginger beer was probably the most perfect small beer, similar in taste to the best champagne, with sparkling effervescence. The Jamaica ginger gave it both exquisite flavor and pungency. The yeast used in brewing, also added special character.

The soda fountain era occurred from about 1875 to 1950. The soda fountain was a perfect place for meeting, for dates, and just happy times. Even the poor could afford a treat.

In the 1905 "Soda Water Dispenser Guide" one can find hundreds of recipes for the soda fountain. There were nationwide challenges to make more exotic drinks and sundaes. One may not have heard of a new cherry punch called "Gunther's Excelsior", or "Hot Checkerberry Root Beer." Another popular reason to go to the soda fountain or drug store, was to celebrate birthdays.

GINGER BEER

Although Ginger Beer originated in England, in the mid 1700's, its ancestry in North America came from a logical development. It can be traced to around 1790 in Canada & the USA, which was shortly after its beginning in England. A significant portion of the American Ginger Beer was imported by ship from England. It was imported throughout the 1800's in greater quantities, even though it was being brewed regionally for a growing market.

One of the reasons that England could export ginger beer was because it was put

into stoneware bottles of superior quality. In 1835, England developed a superior glazing process called Improved Bristol Glaze. After filling,

these bottles were corked and wired to maintain the pressure. This kept the alcohol and carbon dioxide in solution, both of which acted as preservatives, allowing for a long shelf life.

The principal predecessors of Ginger Beer were Mead & Metheglin, which date back to the early 1600's in Colonial



America. Metheglin was a naturally carbonated, yeast-fermented honey beverage, which often included spices, such as ginger, cloves, and mace. It was one of the most popular and longest surviving beverages from the early colonial days.

Ginger Beer also included special yeast for fermentation, and was sweetened with honey, molasses, or cane sugar. Other ingredients included fresh whole ginger and lemons or lemon juice. After brewing, the Ginger Beer was poured into stone bottles, then corked to maintain the natural effervescence.

Early Ginger Beer was produced locally



in small quantities for use by taverns or families. Its popularity lessened after the Civil War, when it was produced commercially in larger quantities, and transported to new markets. The most popular region for ginger beer was Western New York State, especially Syracuse and Buffalo. Ginger Beer breweries flourished along the Erie Canal due to convenient transportation and availability of raw materials for the stoneware and ginger beer. Ginger beer was brewed in smaller quantities in twenty other states.

Naturally fermented Ginger Beer has an exquisite taste which could never be achieved by the carbonation process. This observation was made in England in 1899, and is still true today. Instead of using an essence or extract, used in the carbonation process, fermented Ginger Beer would include fresh Jamaica ginger root, fresh lemons, and special brewer's yeast. This process resulted in a superior brewed beverage, possibly unequalled in its zesty taste. The yeast also added a special flavor and character, similar to tasting a slice of home-baked bread.

Ginger Beer's popularity in the USA hit its peak in 1920, when it was abruptly terminated by Prohibition. Over half of the states never had a chance to bottle Ginger Beer. In England and Canada, the popularity peak occurred in 1935, fifteen years later. The USA had 300 Ginger Beer breweries; Canada had over 1000; and England had 3000. Ginger Beer was the favorite drink of England for over 150 years.

Up through the mid 1800's, many Ginge Beers contained a significant amount of alcohol, about 11%. Limitations in England, as a result of the Excise Act of 1855, required that non-excisable beverages contain less than 2% alcohol, which led bottlers of Ginger Beer





to dilute their brewed concentrates (ginger, licorice, hops, cloves, gentian, sugar, caramel, brewer's yeast, & citric acid) with carbonated water. Ginger Beer differed from ginger ale in that it had a higher gravity and a greater portion of extractive vegetable matter.

Ginger Beer was usually cloudy in appearance, and for this reason was usually bottled in stone bottles. Ginger ale, on the other hand, was sparkling clear and often contained capsicum (extract from cayenne pepper), which increased the pungency of the beverage.

The early primitive type of stoneware Ginger Beer bottle was used from 1790 through 1890, and the transfer type stone bottles were used from 1885 through 1920. The primitive stone bottles were usually quart size, usually impressed with a family name rather than a company name. They were used for home brewing small batches of Ginger Beer or other beverages for the family or a few neighbors.

In England, the under-glaze transfers came into general use a little earlier, around 1880, as they faced considerable competition from ornately embossed glass bottles. The transfer type bottles were smaller, about 9-ounces. They used a Bristol Glaze which could accommodate the stamped transfer.

The popularity of Ginger Beer was abruptly stopped in 1920 with the passage of the Prohibition Laws. This event opened up the markets for soft drinks, including ginger ale, root beer, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and many others. The demise of Ginger Beer would have occurred even without the severity of Prohibition. The stone bottles were returned to the bottlers for sterilization and refilling, however, the inside of the pottery could not be inspected for mice and contamination. High speed glass bottle making machines as well as

high speed filling machines were widely available at that time, which quickly made stoneware bottles obsolete. Canada and England continued using stoneware bottles until 1940.

By this time, in the 1920s some of the major potteries were experiencing difficulties, such as depleting supplies of raw materials, or natural gas.

Only high quality clay could be used for making stone bottles, and it was often shipped long distances to the potteries, after their local supply was exhausted. Enormous quantities of fuel or natural gas were used during firing of the

kilns, which lasted six to seven days for each batch.

This ended the era of decorated transfer Ginger Beer bottles. After Prohibition ended in 1933, Ginger Beer



was revived again, but unfortunately only in glass crown-top bottles; and it was a carbonated soft drink of marginal character. It had to face the strong competition from Coca-Cola, which was rapidly becoming America's favorite soft drink. Today, Ginger Beer is only a memory in the taste buds of bottle historians.

Aromatic Flavors of Root Beer, Spices and Essential Oils

That thirst quenching, popular beverage named Root Beer, enjoyed by children and adults

for the last two centuries, was principally made from a handful of major ingredients. Early Root Beer was made using hand-picked natural ingredients.

Local pharmacists experimented with different quantities of various flavorings, including spices and essential oils. These formulations were later packaged as a concentrated extract. These could be used to obtain an excellent product, with some level of quality control and consistency.

Most of the spices and flavoring plants used in Root Beer extracts, were processed into essential oils. A three-ounce bottle of extract had the power to make five gallons of Root Beer – about 50 bottles.

SPICES

Spices are the dried parts of various plants, grown for their pungent and aromatic attributes. These have been used for centuries to make bland food more exciting. Spices are the pungent parts of tropical plants. These parts may include rhizomes (under ground stems), bulbs, barks, flower buds, stigmas, fruit, seeds, and leaves.

Spices were highly valued in ancient times, and they found extensive experimentation and use in preparing medicines and preserving foods.

Spices have been used over the years as adjuncts in cooking to improve the flavor and piquancy of foods. Many spices have also been used extensively to flavor beverages throughout the world; from a simple hot spicy ginger tonic in the Philippines, to England's Wassail Mead, enjoyed for centuries by the Royal Family and other noblemen, as well as by ordinary folk.

Christmas was taken seriously, since it lasted for seven days, and provided such a great psychological benefit.





SPICE TRADE HISTORY

Eastern hemisphere folks used cinnamon, cassia, and ginger root for thousands of years. Spices were treasured and used as precious commodities, they were also in short supply in many regions. Arab traders skillfully withheld their true sources, and spices became more valuable items of commerce, early in the evolution of the spice trade. Many of the spice traders had elaborate tales of great risk they encountered in the quest and harvesting of their treasures.

Some of these fables included cassia spice, which they said grew in shallow lakes, protected by many pre-historic winged animals; and that cinnamon grew in deep valleys, infested with poisonous snakes. Spice trade and markets expanded rapidly, with overland travel by camel and horses, and sailing ship travel to new lands. Early uses of many spices included the healing power of medicines, holy oils, and of course aphrodisiacs.

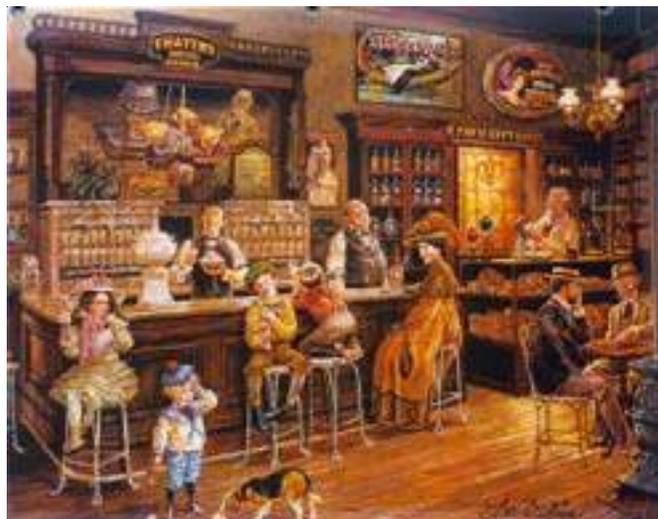
For centuries, only the wealthy people could afford to purchase and enjoy expensive imported spices. Europe slowly became aware that spices could be used to preserve food. Toward the end of the fifteenth century, Europeans began building sailing ships, to search for spice producing islands. The missions of some of history's most famous explorers, often included finding spices for their Royalty and financiers.

ESSENTIAL OILS

Around 1890, Root Beer extract contained 12 to 16 essential oils; today's Root Beer has 7 or 8 oils. Each of these oils may average 40 different chemical

compounds. Essential oils are the ethereal fraction obtained from a plant by physical extraction. The physical method requires distillation or pressing. These oils are taken from the odorous part of the plant, and have traditionally been associated with the fragrance and flavor industry. Since most essential oils frequently occur as a very small percentage of the original plant material, the processing of large volumes is usually required to obtain usable quantities of oil.

Solvent extraction frequently yields various quantities of organic materials, including waxes, fats, acids, and pigments. Since solvent extraction results in a product with excellent and more true properties to that of a distilled oil, many natural products vitally important to the flavor industry are available as various extracts in addition to essential oils.



Root Beer was an American invention, so let's give ourselves credit! Not the Neanderthals, not the Mesopotamians, but just us old gold Americans.

Technically, the number one Root Beer company was Coca-Cola, which used all of the primary ingredients of Root Beer plus the extract of the kola nut. Founder, John S. Pemberton was a pharmacist in Atlanta, who enjoyed mixing drink extracts in his drug store. He sold \$25 worth of Coca-Cola the first year, in 1886.

Prior to 1850, Root Beer was made locally in small quantities using the natural fermentation process, utilizing brewer's yeast and sugar. The natural flavorings were often hand-picked from the local area. After a few hours of primary fermentation, the Root Beer was poured into stone bottles, and tightly corked to retain the pressure, carbon

dioxide, and alcohol, both of which acted as preservatives. One of the primary reasons for using stone bottles, was that they were stronger and would not explode during the secondary fermentation. The bottles were more massive than glass, and when cooled with ice, the Root Beer would remain colder for a longer time.

Dr. Alvin Chase's 1869 recipe book had a Root Beer recipe which included: hops, burdock, dandelion, sarsaparilla, and spikenard; plus yeast and molasses.

ROOT BEER IS ROOT BEER

Young children understand all of the basic flavors of pop: ginger ale, Coke, Pepsi, orange, 7-UP, etc., but Root Beer will always be sort of vague. Eventually kids will ask their father: "What is Root Beer?", and after a pensive moment, he will reply: "Root Beer is Root Beer." The other choice of answers is: "Ask Your Mother."

Root Beer bottlers always consider their products to be proprietary or secret, and as one will see when reading the label's ingredients – not a clue!!! Here is a listing of the primary ingredients found in today's Root Beer:

Water, Sugar – 11%, Citric or Phosphoric Acid – Ph 3.2, Sodium Benzoate, Carbon Dioxide – 3.5%, Gum Acacia, Carmel Color, Cinnamon Oil Nutmeg Oil, Clove Oil, Lemon Oil, Vanillin, Cassia Oil (a tropical bark similar to cinnamon), and Methyl Salicylate (oil of wintergreen).

ROOT BEER IS ROOT BEER – THE PROOF:

Ginger Beer contains the ROOT of the ginger plant, so we can say that Ginger Beer is a Root Beer. Hire's Root Beer originally included ginger root as an ingredient, so we can say that Root Beer contained Ginger Beer; and both Root Beer and Ginger Beer include other common flavorings. This leads us to the following conclusion, with reasonable scientific certainty that: "ROOT BEER IS ROOT BEER".

ANCIENT ROOT BEER HERITAGE
By Alfred Human, Soda Fountain Magazine, October 1931.

Ancient Europe was continuously experimenting and developing new drinks, using natural ingredients and spices.

Sailing ships were sent to strange



places in search of fruits, plant juices, fragrances and the many odd ingredients, which could be used in the beverages of the Middle Ages. Columbus discovered America and the Caribbean Islands. For almost a thousand years the European nations fought each other on land and sea, for the control of precious cloves.

To the early Europeans, drink was considered the vital means of maintaining health. Water supplies were frequently contaminated; disease swept the nations at regular intervals. The physicians dimly suspected that the city wells spread contagion, with the aid of evil spirits and other dark powers, so they usually advised their patients to blend the juices of various fruits and plants with the water. Some of the favorite drinks were composed of honey, cloves, ginger, cinnamon, mace, and similar Oriental spices.

The flavors and spices were very expensive; but the Europeans of the Middle Ages thought that they could not live without these enhancements to being healthy. The ships and slave galleys in the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Nile, and the caravans in treacherous routes through Asia carried on a gigantic trade traffic.

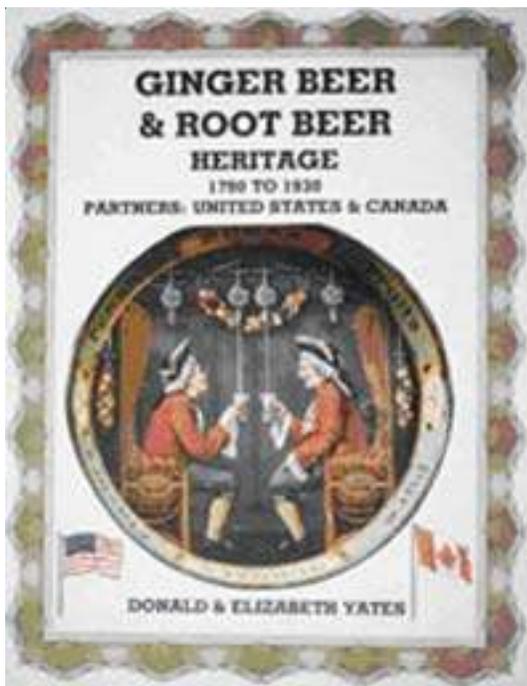
Every country sought to develop a monopoly in this trade. Ships from the major ports of Bologna, Genoa, Venice Constantinople, and Lisbon, would ransack every distant land for these products. The foundation of national wealth consisted of these exotic commodities.

All of Europe dreamed of the Orient. The fame of Oriental medicine was expanded by the tales of the travelers, who had visited Cathay, India, the Eastern Islands, returning with incredible tales of wealth and strange healing plants and fruits. The Far Easterners drank iced fruit juices and

lemon sherbets for their health.

While in Asia, Alexander the Great utilized thirty caves in Petra to store snow for refrigeration purposes. The juices of pomegranates, cherries, lemons, and many more fruits and plants were used with this snow, for drinks and sherbets.

Nutmeg, cloves, ginger, and cinnamon were not only useful as medicine, but they



were supposed to have various magical attributes. Every doctor who based his learning on the ancient knowledge of the Eastern mystics would invent a new beverage or medicine on even the slightest encouragement, utilizing every known vegetable, animal, and mineral substance.

Sassafras tea was used by hundreds of world sailors to cure Scurvy. This was America's original beverage. Lemon juice and Lime juice were being prescribed by the European pharmacists in the 1600s

Citrus juice was also good for Scurvy – Vitamin C.

Another beverage to win popularity for several centuries was sarsaparilla. Voyagers to the New World had returned to Europe with specimens of this smilax root. Sarsaparilla was brewed like Root Beer in the USA, and was also a very popular flavor available at soda fountains.

Sarsaparilla became available all over the world, and was promoted for its medicinal attributes.

Early Root Beer beverages were drunk like a tea, often hot. Brewed Root Beer was developed in America during the Colonial Days. The flavor could be balanced to yield an exquisite taste, while ice cold and refreshing, naturally carbonated to give it a sparkling kick.

Information used in this article comes from a new book titled: **GINGER BEER & ROOT BEER HERITAGE – 1790 TO 1930**, and is available from the author: Donald Yates; 8300 River Corners Rd; Homerville, OH 44235; Phone: 330-625-1025 or Email: donaldbetsyates@earthlink.net Price is \$35, with an additional \$4 for shipping. ISBN #0-9721506-0-9; 400 pages, 2000 color photos.

Included on the front of the book is some of the exquisite Victorian artwork of master artist Lee Dubin. Lee Dubin's representation of early American life is so real and happy that one tends to stare at one of her works in amazement at the many subtle presentations. Don states that he gets a chill every time he looks at one of her works, and gives many thanks to Lee and her husband, Marv Dubin.

The book includes a section of photographs of the great artifacts in the Root Beer Museum in Pottsville, Pennsylvania. Bob Averill is the proprietor.

