



# THE GREAT AMERICAN ROOT BEER SHOWDOWN - FUN FACTS



## Finally, a Beer the Whole Family Can Enjoy

by Lew Bryson

Many of us remember our first 'real' beer: a Guinness on St. Patrick's Day, a friend's homebrew, a pint of Samuel Adams at a club. While my first great beer was indeed a revelation, I also clearly remember my first 'real' encounter with another beverage. I was at a beer store with my brothers-in-law, stocking up for the weekend; a six of this, a bottle of that. On our way to the cashier, we passed a display of root beer. Root beer? Why not? We grabbed a six of Dominion and a handsome brown swingtop bottle of Virgil's, loaded it all in the car and left.

As I wheeled the car out into traffic, I grabbed the Virgil's, levered the swingtop open, and took a swig. Time slowed, and my senses came into sharp focus. Expecting just another soda, I found a complexly delicious experience: creamy texture, rich caramel sweetness, a rush of vanilla. "You gotta try this," I said reverently, handing it to Curt. His eyes lit up as he swallowed the brew, and I gunned the wagon back to the store, where we bought up the entire stock of Virgil's

Why was that root beer so arresting? Most national-market food and drink has been subject to the same 'blandification' process as mainstream pilsner beer. Inevitably, as a producer tries to expand a market, a product gets 'rounded off' in order to be acceptable to more customers. The large overtake the small, and we wind up with white bread, Velveeta, and Coors Light. Mark Clough, head of Kemper's Soda, relates it to the same 'marketing pyramid' that drives beer styles and sales in America: "The blander the product, the more people you can sell it to. As you increase the character, make the flavor more extreme, fewer people will like it. But those who do like it, really like it!" Clough should know: his microbrewed root beer (and other sodas) sell more than a lot of microbrewed beers.

A number of small root beer bottlers have managed to evade these economics, but many Americans only know the top four brands: A&W, Barq's, Mug, and Hires. As with mass-market beer, these are certainly not poorly-made products. They are made with careful quality

control and high standards. But the Virgil's and the Dominion are unabashed root beers, proudly not aimed at the widest of markets.

This new breed of premium root beer is following behind and beside the craft-brewed beer revolution. There are root beers with names familiar to the beer enthusiast -- Kemper, Sprecher, Abita, Dominion, F.X. Matt -- and many brewpubs produce a root beer for kids and adults alike. Like brewers, there are some old, established, 'regional' root beers -- Stewart's, IBC -- which have strong followings and produce exceptional products. Root beers have appeared on store shelves priced at \$5.00 a six-pack and up, and like their barley brethren they sell briskly.

The big boys have already noticed: Coca-Cola and Pepsi are gearing up to push their respective Barq's and Mug brands (both former regionals recently purchased). They see root beer as The Next Big Thing. These developments mean trouble for some small bottlers. For years the giants allowed their distributors and bottlers to carry any root beer they liked. Now substantial financial muscle is being exercised to ensure that Barq's or Mug are the only root beers available from franchised distributors. "Deep Root", my anonymous source at an established 'flavor house' outside Philadelphia, told me not to worry: "The big guys want it all, but they've been remarkably unsuccessful at everything but colas." Mark Clough at Kemper isn't worried at all about the big root beer push: "We intend to grab their horse as it goes flying by and ride it ourselves!"

What is root beer, anyway? Folks seem to think it's a wholesome beverage brewed by our Colonial ancestors, but root beer was invented by Charles W. Hires (you may recognize that name). His concoction was introduced at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876. Mr. Hires mixed up his drink using a number of natural oils and plant extracts, chief among them being sassafras root bark extract, oil of birch, and vanilla extract. "Deep Root" guessed that "We wouldn't really like Charles Hires' original recipe, it was pretty harsh. There's less bite today." But the same types of extracts and oils are used by brewers of root beer today as well, from the large to the small. You won't find anyone

throwing bales of bark or roots into a brewing copper. "Deep Root" works at a flavor house, a business which supplies extracts, oils, and artificial flavors to various industries, including soft drink makers. Their company has a vast amount of expertise in how these various flavors affect the palate, and in how the flavors blend. These are the people to approach when you want to formulate a root beer. "Deep Root" explained how most root beers are created. "There are around 20 flavorings in the average root beer. We formulate a flavor for someone based on an old recipe or sometimes by mimicking an existing root beer. There's nothing new out there. Then we ship it out as an emulsion, about 1 gallon of base to 100 cases of root beer. The recipes are kept in our vault." There is a fanatical secrecy about root beer formulations, and very few producers were willing to provide even the name of their flavor house.

"Brewed" root beer means that the oils and extracts are actually cooked, rather than a simple cold water infusion of flavorings. As homebrewers know, this makes for a better marriage of the flavors. According to Randy Sprecher of Sprecher Brewing in Milwaukee, brewing also allows fine-tuning: "You can drive off some of the flavors you don't want [from the extracts] by brewing."

But root beer, like the old gray mare, ain't what it used to be. There was a scramble in the industry in the early 60's, when the FDA decided that sassafras root bark was carcinogenic. Extract-makers strove to find a palatable substitute. Most people agree that while the artificial substitutes are close, and the reformulated brews are good, genuine sassafras made a better root beer.

Once you've gone out and found your prized root beer, you'll want to sit down and take it a little bit seriously. Pour a fresh glass and focus your beer- or whisky-honed senses upon it. You'll notice things immediately: wintergreen aroma, vanilla, the minty-berry sassafras smell, and perhaps some teaberry. Individual brands may have 'signature' aromas such as coffee (Stewart's), cinnamon (Barq's), or licorice (Dad's).

Take a sip. Note the carbonation. Like real ale, low-carbonation root beers like Kemper allow more of the true flavor of the drink to come through. You may notice a creamy

texture, a full body, particularly in the root beers sweetened with honey or all cane sugar. Matt's 1888 Tavern was particularly creamy, as were the Sprecher and Abita. "Deep Root" says "Cane sugar will give you that creaminess; you don't get it from high fructose corn syrup." Randy Sprecher uses honey because "Honey's got a lot of complex things in it, there are changes in the root beer from it."

The flavors will come through immediately. You may taste wintergreen ("That's actually from oil of birch," says "Deep Root."), mint, licorice, teaberry, cinnamon, nutmeg, eucalyptus, anise, orange. . . . There are some artificial flavors too, including vanillin. "Deep Root" says that in root beer, "the characteristics you get from vanillin are not really reproducible with 'genuine' vanilla."

While the concoction of root beer does not allow for the wide variety of flavors and aromas you will find in beer, the blending of the oils and extracts, their quality, and the method of preparation will make for distinct differences in flavor. For example, a brand new root beer in the Philadelphia market, Hank's, was developed by Philly beer wholesalers L&M Beverage when they moved into the soda market and decided to do their own root beer. John Salvatore, of the family which owns L&M ('Hank' is John's dad), says "We took a 100 year old recipe and tuned it up with some anise and a more creamy texture, and did a low carbonation. Formulating it took over four months of trial and tasting."

I asked "Deep Root" what made a root beer a root beer: "Tradition, mostly, a mimicking of the flavors of roots, berries, and plant extracts. I mean, root beer's only dark because of tradition, it's actually a kind of clear, cloudy mix until you color it." "Root beer is one of the most ill-defined products out there," Randy Sprecher laughs. The wonderful thing about root beer is that it is a pleasure your entire family can share, including the toddlers and the teetotalers. It makes for an exceptional training tool to show less experienced people a way to tease out flavors in food and drink. It still makes a great float with a good vanilla ice cream. And it's just a lot of fun to drink. Re-visit your youth, try some high-falutin' root beer!

Source: [www.digitalironworks.com/spike/rb/bryson.html](http://www.digitalironworks.com/spike/rb/bryson.html)





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## Some Root Beer Ingredients

### SARSAPARILLA

[sas-puh-RIHL-uh]

Originally derived from the dried roots of tropical smilax vines, this flavor is usually associated with a carbonated drink popular in the mid-1800s. Today's sarsaparilla products – including the no-longer-popular soft drink – use artificial flavorings.

### SASSAFRAS

[SAS-uh-fras]

The leaves of the native North American sassafras (albidum or variifolium) tree, which are dried and used to make filé powder and sassafras tea. The root bark is used as a flavoring agent in root beer.

### WINTERGREEN

The name of this evergreen plant, which is native to eastern North America, comes from the fact that it retains foliage all winter long. In addition to its rich green leaves, wintergreen bears white flowers and bright red berries. The leaves produce a pungent oil that's used to flavor a variety of products including candy, gum, medicine, etc. Wintergreen is also known as checkerberry.

Source: [www.epicurious.com](http://www.epicurious.com)



## The History of Root Beer

There's nothing quite like a frosty mug of creamy, real, old fashioned root beer. But where did this sweet beverage come from? Though the roots of root beer are so deep, they're more American than apple pie, there are varying theories about just who invented root beer and where it came to be.

### FROM THE EARLY AMERICANS TO SHAKESPEARE

There are early historical documents in which Shakespeare is noted to have drunk "small beers." This European brew, actually made from an early colonial American recipe, contained 2-12-percent alcohol, and was considered a light, social drink made from herbs, berries and bark. During American Colonial times, root beer was introduced along with other beverages like Birch Beer, Sarsaparilla Beer, and Ginger Beer. Only root beer would emerge as a longtime favorite. There are even historical documents which show 18th century farm owners brewing an alcoholic version of root beer in backyard stills for family get-togethers, social events, and parties.

### MEDICINAL ORIGINS

Most historians believe that the invention of an actual root beer recipe happened by pure accident, thanks in part to an inventive pharmacist, eager to create a miracle drug. Though people had been drinking an herbal home brewed variety for years, root beer was still just an experiment for the creative and inventive. In 1870, an unknown

pharmacist toying with a handful of roots, berries and herbs, came up with a recipe for root beer which consisted of juniper, wintergreen, spikenard, pipsissewa, sarsaparilla, vanilla beans, hops, dog grass, birch bark and licorice. The original drink was quite medicinal in nature, tasting both bitter and sweet. Even though the pharmacist offered the drink to the public as a cure-all, it was never marketed or well-received.

### HIRES COMPANY

Meanwhile, Charles Hires, also a pharmacist, was on his honeymoon around the same time when he discovered an herbal tea he simply could not part with. After taking the recipe of herbs, berries and roots home to Philadelphia with him, he began selling a packaged dry mixture to the public made from many of the same ingredients as the original herbal tea. Well received, Hires soon developed a liquid concentrate blended together from more than 25 herbs, berries and roots. The public loved the new drink and as a result, Hires introduced commercial root beer to the public in 1876 at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. In no time, it became a popular drink of its day. By 1893, the Hires family sold bottled versions of their well-known brew, sealing their place in rootbeer history.

No matter which version of root beer history is true, one thing is for certain: Rootbeer is an original brew, predating colas and other popular sodas.

### GOVERNMENT BAN

The key ingredient to root beer is sassafras root, which is

what produces the tangy, thick brewed flavor that root beer is noted for. In 1960, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration banned the use of sassafras oil, labeling it a carcinogen. Root beer makers began experimenting with new and improved recipes, minus the sassafras oil, hoping to find a suitable tasting alternative. Not long after the ban, the root beer industry was saved when inventors discovered that sassafras could be used afterall, if treated first, to remove the oil.

### WHAT IS IN ROOT BEER?

There's is no true authentic root beer recipe, since there are so many different combinations and brews. Over time, root beer has contained ingredients like allspice, birch bark, coriander seed, ginger and ginger root, hops, burdock root, dandelion root, guaiacum chips, spice-wood, wild cherry bark and bitters, wintergreen and wintergreen oil, yellow dock, prickly ash bark and even, molasses.

Today, root beer is made from a mixture of flavorings, sweeteners and carbonation. Depending on the brew, bottler and manufacturer, root beer still contains a large number of herbs (burdock root, sarsaparilla root, yellow dock root, ginger root, juniper berries, wild cherry bark, birch bark, and etc.), oils (anise, lemon, artificial wintergreen, and etc.), sweeteners (sugar, molasses, corn sugar, fructose, aspartame, brown sugar, lactose, malt extract, and etc.) and carbonation (yeast, artificial, forced carbonation.)

Source: [in.essortment.com/historyrootbeer\\_rhnc.htm](http://in.essortment.com/historyrootbeer_rhnc.htm)

## Stout Billy's Information Library

### FLAVORING WITH REAL SASSAFRAS

The original true flavor of root beer comes from sassafras root. Because sassafras root contains safrole, it cannot be sold in the US for human consumption. Sassafras bark may be sold but is not very good at providing flavor to the beverage. Sassafras grows wild in much of the Eastern US.

Making your own infusions allows for experimentation and a distinctive 'house' brew.

Root beer is flavored with a distillate of the young shoots or root bark of Sassafras\_variifolium, a member of the laurel family. Sassafras has also been used to make tea for medicinal and enjoyment, and to make a yellow dye. In addition, an oil from sassafras fruit has been used in perfumery.

The trouble with sassafras is that it contains safrole, a carcinogen (see the NTP 85-002, 1985).

### OTHER FLAVORING INGREDIENTS

In addition to sugar and Sassafras, Root Beer can also contain several other flavoring ingredients. Below is a list of common fla-

voring ingredients compiled from a number of different recipes.

- allspice • birch bark • burdock root • coriander seed • Dandelion root • ginger, tincture of ginger, Ginger Root • guaiacum chips • hops • hot drops • Juniper Berries • molasses • prickly ash bark • Sarsaparilla, sarsaparilla root • spicewood • spikenard root • wild cherry bark • wild cherry bitters • Wintergreen, wintergreen bark, oil of wintergreen • yellow dock, yellow dock root

### SWEETENING

There are many ingredients that can be used to sweeten the root

beer. Some of these can be fermented by yeast to provide carbonation. Some of these provide flavor as well as sweetness.

- Table sugar (sucrose)
- Molasses
- Corn Sugar (dextrose, glucose)
- Fructose
- Sweet-n-low
- Aspartame
- Lactose
- Brown Sugar
- turbinado (cane sugar)
- Malt extract (maltose)

Source: [www.stoutbillys.com/stout/infonsf/Library/OFF30A5F.htm](http://www.stoutbillys.com/stout/infonsf/Library/OFF30A5F.htm)