

Pop Bottles

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

When I was coming along, I often rode my bicycle or walked the two miles to Bob Green's country store (now "Something Different"). Along the way, I picked up "pop" bottles to trade in for *BB Bats* and *Mary Janes*. In those days, soft drink bottles were made of thick glass and were cleaned and refilled at local bottling plants. There was a two-cent deposit applied when drinks were bought and then paid out by merchants when bottles were returned. In those days, two cents meant a lot more than today, especially to a youngster with a sweet tooth.

I often tell customers that story when they ask about the history of our store. If they appear interested and I have time, I will show and tell my version of how "soda pop" and "pop bottle" came into the vernacular. During the last half of the 19th Century there was growing demand worldwide for carbonated beverages, generically called "sodas" because they evolved from soda water, which contained acids and mineral salts and was balanced with sodium carbonate or sodium bicarbonate to simulate naturally effervescent mineral waters.

Going back to antiquity, mineral waters were prized for their medicinal and restorative properties. The best, such as those from Seltzer, Germany, were naturally carbonated and fizzy. It didn't take long for pharmacists to realize that they could re-create mineral waters with carbonates and minerals. In the early 19th Century, a process was developed to compress carbon dioxide and incorporate it into water. Pharmacists added herbs, botanicals, flavorings and sugar to create a myriad of carbonated soft drinks. These sodas were originally marketed as remedies for an assortment of ailments. Soon soda fountains were an integral part of the drug store business. Carbonated waters quickly lose their fizz unless kept under pressure. Heavy glass bottles made the perfect container, but there was no practical way of sealing a bottle tightly enough to contain a gas and make it easy to open at home. In the United States, over 1500 patents for closures were applied for and some were quite ingenious.

At this point in the story, I show my audience the original "pop" bottle that a customer gave to me several years ago. It is a hand-blown bottle made of thick aqua colored glass. It has a rubber gasket inside the mouth and a glass marble that can seal against the gasket and be held in place by pressure. This bottle is pinched across just below the neck so that the marble does not fall to the bottom and also pinched on the sides so that, once dislodged, the marble can be trapped, preventing it from sealing against the gasket and stopping the liquid from coming out. After filling with a carbonated beverage, the bottle is inverted to seat the marble. The marble could be dislodged by *popping* the bottom of the bottle sharply against the heel of the hand, or by *popping* the marble with a stick or little finger. Hence "soda pop" and "pop bottle". The design is simply elegant except for one fatal flaw: it had to be transported in wagons; in those days the roads were rough; and a good bump in the road could conceivably "pop" the whole load.

This made a great story and I delighted in telling it. Unfortunately, as with many things that sound or look good, it did not stand up well to closer scrutiny. It seems that the term “pop” in reference to carbonated drinks predated my pop bottle by a good fifty years. In 1812 English poet Robert Southey wrote about: “A new manufactory of a nectar, between soda-water and ginger beer, and called pop, because ‘pop goes the cork’ when it is drawn, and pop you would go off too, if you drank too much of it.” So much for my veracity.



My pop bottle is properly called a *Codd* bottle because it was designed and patented in 1872 by Hiram Codd of London, England. It remained popular for bottling carbonated drinks for decades, especially in Britain, and is still used in India and Japan. Few survived intact because kids broke them to retrieve the marble. In the United State, the Hutchinson spring-type internal stopper, patented in 1879, became the standard until replaced by the modern crown-cork bottle seal prior to the First World War.

Today, most soft drinks are packaged in plastic bottles and contain High Fructose Corn Syrup (HFCS) instead of sugar. Plastic is cheaper than glass, but more permeable. Eventually the contents will go flat. Sodas taste better when packaged in glass because it is inert and does not affect flavor. HFCS is cheaper than sugar, but it does not taste as good, nor is it good for you. HFCS is not metabolized in the same way as sugar and is implicated in a number of chronic disorders that have reached crisis stage in recent years, such as childhood obesity and type-two diabetes (see my previous article “High Fructose Corn Syrup, How-Sweet-Fat It Is” published in the September – October issue of *Pleasant Living*). It is ironic that soft drinks, which started as health drinks, created by pharmacist and sold for medicinal purposes, have become the greatest nutritional disaster since hydrogenated vegetable oils were used to make margarine and shortening. At “Something Different” we have a variety of soft drinks made with real cane sugar and packaged in glass bottles.