

## Specialty Sodas Perk Up Beverage Menus

Specialty sodas help operators extend their brand messages to beverage menus.

By Leah A. Zeldes, Special to R&I -- Restaurants & Institutions, December 31, 2009

A handful of fountain sodas—cola, diet cola, a lemon-lime drink and perhaps root beer—is the extent of the soft-drink list on most menus. Not so at **S'MAC in New York City**, where owner Sarita Ekya boosts beverage offerings with organically sweetened sodas and bottled all-natural juice spritzers.

"Specialty sodas span such a diverse customer range," Ekya says. "I am surprised more people don't offer them."

Operators can easily whip up unique house-made sodas by mixing flavored syrups and other ingredients with carbonated water supplied by soda guns or made in soda siphons. For those without the equipment or inclination to make their own sodas, recently introduced fountain modules can dispense as many as 50 kinds of pop, and the variety and availability of interesting bottled sodas is on the rise, too. Funky flavors appearing on innovative menus include persimmon, vanilla bean, rhubarb, kumquat and juniper berry.

"Menus offer such creative food dishes, but beverages stay the same," Ekya says. "People are ready to mix it up."

### A Taste of Home

Regional sodas can bolster a concept's authenticity on the beverage side. Pie Town Pizza, a Chicago-style pizza parlor in the Las Vegas suburb of Henderson, Nev., takes inspiration from the Windy City for its drink menu too, serving a bright-green, lime-flavored fountain soda brewed in Chicago as well as a selection of flavors from a small, independent bottler from Chicago's South Side.

**Mercadito**, a small chain of cantinas with locations in New York, Miami and Chicago, serves Mexican-style sodas in exotic flavors such as tamarind and hibiscus and imported Latin versions of big-name cola brands. Many Jewish delicatessens carry canned celery, black-cherry and cream sodas that originated in New York City, and nationwide, a number of South Asian eateries, among them Kasa in San Francisco and Shalimar in Austin, Texas, offer a lemon-lime beverage with a hint of ginger that evokes home to Indian expatriates and gives others a sense of place.

Harkening to another time, Che Sara Sara Café at Omni Bedford Springs Resort in Bedford, Pa., pours an old-fashioned draft root beer and a sells a line of classic sodas that originated in 1924. The old-time soft drinks tie into the resort's celebration of its heritage, says Scott Stuckey, the resort's general manager. "They are an extension of this journey back in time," he says.



House-mixed cherry sodas are a signature at DMK Burger Bar in Chicago.

### Fresh & Bubbly

When **Stanford Hospital** in Palo Alto, Calif., introduced its Farm Fresh inpatient menu, it only followed that items such as soups made with local, organic ingredients and meatballs featuring grass-fed beef would be accompanied by beverage choices such as bottled organic ginger ale sweetened with evaporated cane juice (a less-processed alternative to refined sugar). "Everything on the tray is organic," says Executive Chef Beni Velazquez.

Making sodas in-house appealed to Karen Adelman and Peter Levitt, owners of **Saul's Delicatessen & Restaurant** in Berkeley, Calif., for environmental reasons: On-site production means less bottle and can waste and a lower carbon footprint for the operation, given that it isn't shipping in sodas from national vendors. Plus, because Saul's doesn't use high-fructose corn syrup in its sodas, the restaurant reduces its reliance on commodity crops.

The drinks taste better, too, Adelman says. The deli makes its own ginger ale as well as sodas in flavors such as cream and cardamom; seasonal varieties include strawberry, cherry, blood orange and Meyer lemon. (For more on making flavored sodas, see "Soda Made Simple" sidebar below.)

House-made sodas also are in keeping with the locally focused menu at **Lincoln Restaurant** in Portland, Ore., where rotating choices have included persimmon, cherry, mint and rhubarb.

"It's a little more interesting, and ingredient-driven sodas are very food-friendly," says owner David Welch. Guests who don't drink alcohol also appreciate that the restaurant offers flavorful alternative drinks, he adds.



**Big Bowl's ginger ale**  
House-made ginger ale is a big seller for Wow Bao and Big Bowl.

### Tapping Expanded Audiences

Teetotalers aren't the only ones happy to see a wide selection of soda options. David Puopolo, owner of Soda Pop's, a new Los Angeles sandwich-and-salad spot, says offbeat soda has broad appeal. He offers 15 to 25 bottled brands from across the country. "I'm finding out [for example, that] there's a connoisseur clientele who really know their root beers," he says.

Flavored sodas can add a kid-friendly element to beverage menus, says Chef-owner Michael Kornick, who menus a signature cherry soda at his recently opened **DMK Burger Bar** in Chicago. For grownups, they also make unique mixers. "They're pretty cool to use in cocktails," says Paul Tanguay, beverage consultant to Mercadito, which serves drinks such as the *Chicas Fuertes*, made with tequila, lime juice, Mexican grapefruit soda and epazote.

At Chicago-based Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises' **Wow Bao** and **Big Bowl** concepts, house-made ginger ale is mixed to order using ginger-infused simple syrup combined with carbonated water and fresh lemon. The restaurants also make ginger ale in jasmine-green-tea and pomegranate flavors. The drinks have become so popular that Chef-partner **Bruce Cost** has begun bottling them to sell from coolers near the host stands.

## Profitability Pros and Cons

Profit margins on bottled sodas are markedly lower than those on fountain drinks, says S'MAC's Ekya. "However, as a business owner, you need to provide what matches your food the best," she says.

Some operations, such as Mercadito, upcharge for bottled beverages, while others absorb the difference. "There are additional fees that we pay for these beverages due to availability and shipping," says Stuckey, but the resort still prices specialty sodas in line with other soft drinks.

Adelman says it's less expensive to make soda in-house than it is to buy the bottled and canned celery, black-cherry and cream sodas that Saul's used to offer. On the first glass, Saul's charges the same price for its house-made drinks as for standard fountain beverages, but customers pay for refills on specialty sodas.

At Lincoln Restaurant, house-made sodas help pare costs by repurposing ingredients that would otherwise go to waste. Chefs might use fresh persimmons in a salad and then create persimmon soda using a simple syrup made with the trimmings. An excess of fresh rosemary might inspire a similarly made rosemary-flavored pop.

Contact writer at [riedit@reedbusiness.com](mailto:riedit@reedbusiness.com)

### Soda Made Simple

Although operators can brew naturally carbonated root beer and ginger ale using methods similar to those employed in home-brewing beer, doing so takes extra time and expertise. It's much simpler to create flavored syrups and mix them with carbonated water for a broad variety of house-made options.

At Lincoln Restaurant in Portland, Ore., chefs make simple syrups infused with seasonal ingredients such as persimmons, cherries or rhubarb and mix sodas to order using carbonated water from the soda gun. "Think about flavor proportions [when creating recipes]," says owner David Welch. Sometimes additional elements such as citrus or vanilla can balance the taste.

New syrups are made weekly at Lincoln. "The fresher the infusion, the more vibrant the flavor," Welch says.

To reduce labor, operators also can purchase prepared soda flavorings or syrups to mix with carbonated water. Chicago's DMK Burger Bar uses a mix for its cherry soda, and many coffee bars get more bang for their buck from latte-flavoring syrups by mixing them into soda water to create Italian sodas.

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