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Soft(er) Drinks

By Lisa Turner

Quench your summer thirst with natural sodas

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In 1886, John S. Pemberton, an Atlanta pharmacist, mixed up a combination of sugar, flavorings, and carbonated water, and made the first Coca-Cola. The original formulation also contained cocaine (from the coca leaf) and caffeine (from kola nut), and the stimulating beverage was an overnight success (though the cocaine was removed soon after). Over the next 140 years, the many innovations and technological inventions that followed—glass blowing machines, gas-powered trucks, automatic vending machines, six-pack cartons, diet soft drinks, aluminum cans, and plastic bottles—rapidly propelled soft drinks to their current position as the most frequently consumed beverage in the United States.



Iffy Ingredients

For awhile, all was well. Soda seemed like an innocent-enough beverage—it was a safe and "healthy" alternative to liquor that offered a pleasant pick-me-up without the edge of coffee. But here's the hard news about soft drinks: The beverages we've loved for years are softening our bones, trashing our kidneys, making us fat, and possibly causing cancer. Some of the most suspect ingredients:

Phosphoric acid, added to soft drinks for its tangy flavor, is a chemical used in industry and dentistry to remove rust and roughen tooth enamel. In the body, phosphoric acid alters pH levels, making the blood more acidic and, consequently, leaching minerals from the bones. Over time, this depletes the bones' concentrations of calcium, magnesium, and other crucial minerals, contributing to bone loss and osteoporosis. Additionally, phosphoric acid has been linked with chronic kidney disease and kidney stones. Caffeine, a significant component of colas, may also play a role in the connection between soda and low bone density.

Sodium benzoate is a preservative commonly used in sodas to prevent mold from forming. Though it's on the Generally Recognized as Safe (GRAS) list of FDA additives, concerns have been raised about its safety. Some researchers say it damages DNA and may lead to cirrhosis of the liver and degenerative diseases such as Parkinson's. Additionally, when sodium benzoate is combined with ascorbic acid (vitamin C), it can form benzene, a well-known carcinogen.

High-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) is used in most soft drinks as a cheaper alternative to sucrose (sugar). HFCS has been linked to insulin resistance and metabolic syndrome, a major risk factor for heart attack, stroke, and diabetes. Additionally, in one study, almost half of the tested samples of high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS) contained mercury, a known neurotoxin.

Artificial sweeteners. Although the FDA has approved them for use in food products, some experts remain wary of artificial sweeteners, especially aspartame, charging that there's just not enough research on their long-term safety. And even diet soft drinks are linked with increased risk of obesity and metabolic syndrome, according to new research. In one study, drinking one or more sodas a day—even diet sodas—increases the risk of metabolic syndrome by 45 percent.

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Pleasing Potables

Natural sodas offer a cleaner solution to conventional soft drinks. They're free of phosphoric acid, artificial sweeteners, HFCS, and sodium benzoate. And they're more diverse in flavor and approach: you'll find micro-brewed root beer, designer colas, quirky flavors such as lavender and lemon grass, brain-boosting herbs, and natural sweeteners. Sip some of these fresh brands, and enjoy the softer side of soda.

- **Zevia.** Sweetened with stevia, it's available in classic soda flavors; try the Cola—it's darn close to the "real thing."
- **Blue Sky.** They carry organic and stevia-sweetened blends along with natural offerings. Try Dr. Becker, modeled after—well, you know.
- **Hansen's.** You'll find a basic range of natural sodas in appealing flavors, but take note: their diet line contains sucralose.
- **GuS.** It stands for "grown-up sodas," and features less-sweet flavors such as Dry Pomegranate in appealing screw-top glass bottles.
- **Oogave.** Agave-sweetened organic Oogave comes in several unique flavor combinations, including Watermelon Cream and Strawberry Rhubarb.
- **Santa Cruz Organic.** This juice/fizzy water blend isn't a classic soda, but it tastes great and it's organic—a big plus if you're shopping for kids.
- **DRY Soda.** Lightly sweetened in clear glass bottles, this designer brand comes in flavors such as Lemon Grass, Lavender, Juniper Berry, and Cucumber.
- **Brain TonIQ.** An organic, herb-based alternative to brain-blasting carbonated energy beverages.
- **Virgil's.** You'll find gourmet, spice-infused root beer along with cola and classic cream soda flavors. Packaged in appealing stopper-top bottles, it's sure to be a hit at your next BYOB.
- **Maine Root.** Their biggest seller is billed as "Free-Range Root Beer." Other keynote flavors include Sarsaparilla and Blueberry.



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