

Fizz Biz

Soda's going upscale, and choices are more diverse than ever.

By John Paul Boukis

If you can carbonate it, it's probably for sale now in a can or bottle somewhere. With traditional soft drink sales, well ... flat, premium sodas and sparkling juices are crowding supermarket shelves in record numbers. In the mad scramble to stake a claim, these fizzers run the gamut from organic to indulgent in every natural flavor imaginable. Fine hotels are noting the trend and tracking down boutique sparklers for the bar, in-room, the dining room—even the kitchen.

Soda is big business, with nearly \$49 billion in U.S. wholesale sales in 2006. Beverage Marketing Corporation keeps close tabs on traditional soft drink sales. They note 2005 as the first time in 20 years traditional soda sales declined. The writing is clearly on the wall as PepsiCo and Coca-Cola acquire smallish juice, tea, water, and, yes, premium soda brands.

New product launches lean heavily toward health-conscious offerings. Juices abound in increasingly specialized flavors: Meyer lemon, key lime, Clementine orange, and Fuji apple; dizzying combinations: blood orange and cranberry, imperial lime and green tea, mandarin and mint; and exotic specialties with a host of health claims: açai berry, ginkgo, ginseng, and lemongrass. Yesterday's exotic tropicals are market staples now: Pomegranate placed third last year (behind orange and lemon) on the list of most popular new product flavors, according to Beverage Marketing Corporation.

New sodas may be all-natural, organic, infused with green tea, spiked with vitamins, even sourced from free-trade ingredients, but they almost all agree on one thing: no highfructose corn syrup. Full-bodied, sugar-rich options tend to be established brands like Boylan, Hank's, and Jones. Still standing strong, each now has a "natural" line, if not a full-fledged sparkling juice option.

The latest, hippest entrants promote a "dry" sugar-reduced emphasis on nuanced flavor. And as these sodas grow up, chefs are beginning to look at them with something other than confused indifference. Making chic menus at restaurants like Charlie Trotter's in Chicago, the French Laundry in Napa Valley, and Per Se in New York, chic sodas appeal to non-drinkers hoping for something special, whether teetotalers, kids, pregnant women, or just guests taking it easy on the booze midweek.

Dry Soda is a stylish new entrant focusing on upscale dining placements. "The sales rep here in Austin turned me on to it," says Executive Chef Phil Bouza at Barton Creek Resort & Spa. "As a less sweet option, I think it goes seriously with both savory and sweet." He offers the restaurant's chocolate taco as a pairing match to Dry's lavender. Chef Mark Carter at the Peerless Hotel in Ashland, Oregon, is purportedly using the soda as a marinade for his calamari.

Fizzy Lizzy greets guests in-room at the Bacara Resort & Spa in Southern California. IZZE, a carbonated juice option, has strong distribution, from the local Starbucks to Kimpton's Denver Hotel Monaco. Sarah McHugh, director of catering, says, "We serve IZZE juices at all of our beverage breaks. It's got great packaging, shows well, tastes good, and it's something different. People really like it—we're getting great feedback, and it's selling well."

Chris Sperling, sommelier/mixologist at Copper Beech Inn in Ivoryton, Connecticut, swears by GuS—that's Grown-up Soda, a more juice-focused dry soda. "We do pair them, and they pair very well," says Sperling. "I'll serve it in a wine glass: Meyer lemon soda with Dover sole; duck with pomegranate seeds pairs with a pomegranate soda. Ginger soda goes well with sushi and Asian foods. Crimson orange soda matches a ceviche with scallops, fresh oranges, and citrus juices." Could the first soda sommelier be far behind?

When a guest says, "I'm fine with water," a waiter at Addison proposes the alcohol-free pairing menu. For \$25, each course comes with a different bubbly concoction paired to please. Jesse Rodriguez, wine director for Addison at the Grand Del Mar Resort, San Diego, explains the experience.

"We'll start them off with lemongrass Dry Soda and kefir lime muddled with Thai basil. Served over ice, it's completely refreshing. It works awesome with all the first-course options like mussels with lemon verbena sauce. The risotto course follows with a beautiful presentation of lavender Dry." Muddled with fresh blueberries and blackberries, it's poured over ice in a decanter with spearmint—shaken and served tableside. A black cherry Boylan or rhubarb Dry stands up with heartier main courses of poulard, beef, or lamb.

"Every day vendors push the envelope," says Rodriguez. "What they did recently is rhubarb fleshed out with raspberry and cranberry. It gives a little tart astringency you might get from the tannin in wine, not sweet at all. GuS Meyer lemon soda, straight up, is perfect as-is for the cheese course. Dessert gets a sweeter Boylan cream soda or root beer. It appeals to guests who aren't drinking wine that evening, also kids who come in with their parents; we walk them through it so they're having an experience alongside the adults. We have two to four guests a night take us up on it. Instead of leaving money on the table, we're providing another service."

Most agree boutique soda is still in the early stages of consumer demand. "I think it's something we're trying to get consumers to try out," says Chef Bouza. "I think demand is from both sides," says Sperling, "we can market and push them, then customers see and respond to the difference in quality."

Challenges remain. Like any boutique offering, distribution is still a hurdle to hotel access. "We've had a lot of hotels interested," says Maine Root president Mark Seiler, "but when it comes down to the purchase, they won't press their chain for distribution. Most are still stuck on the Coke-Pepsi train."

And since wine is a significantly more important beverage profit center, non-alcoholic pairing remains a novelty. Eager to belly up to the bar too, every brand pushes its potential cocktail applications. Sperling enjoys the added possibilities, serving up crimson orange cosmos as well as a mojito topped off with lemon Pellegrino. Consumers will make their decision known (as ever), but early hotel adopters are enthusiastic. And as supermarket shelf space keeps expanding for this segment, customer expectations for fine dining nonalcoholic options will continue to rise. Luckily, there's plenty of fizz about.

John Paul Boukis is a frequent contributor to HOTEL F&B.