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LIFE | FOOD & DRINK

# Buy Into These Bubbles: Seltzer's Fizz Is Back

Carbonated water is finding new sales; Dr Pepper to expand distribution, and a home-delivery service flourishes

By **CHELSEY DULANEY**

June 16, 2015 5:24 p.m. ET

The seltzer men who sold fizzy water in glass bottles a century ago wouldn't believe it: Seltzer is having a sales burst.

The beverage is benefiting from renewed interest from people who are increasingly avoiding not only sugar-sweetened sodas but also diet sodas with artificial sweeteners like aspartame.

Seltzer—often known as sparkling water or soda water outside the Northeast—is a welcome third option. It offers the palate-pleasing tingle of a bubbly soda with a much-simplified ingredient list of often nothing more than water and carbonation. An expansive list of seltzers with hints of fruit flavor, ranging from cherry pomegranate to tropical Mai Tai, can make the sugar- and calorie-free seltzer feel like a treat. Some people add sprigs of mint or slices of lemon, lime or orange.

Several beverages that look like seltzer contain other ingredients. Club soda is seltzer with added sodium, and sparkling mineral waters from springs, like Perrier and San Pellegrino, have other minerals, too. Tonic is a sweetened soft drink with trace amounts of quinine, a bitter-tasting substance once used to treat malaria.

Americans' consumption of seltzer jumped 29% over the five years ended in 2013, according to the most recently available data from Beverage Marketing Corp., a New York-based industry tracker. That compares with a drop of a more than 7% for carbonated soft drinks overall during the same five-year period.

Seltzer's resurgence is happening with hardly any brand advertising. Gary Hemphill, the firm's managing director of research, said companies still spend much more to advertise traditional soda brands than bubbly waters, even though soda volumes haven't grown in a decade.

Like many converts, Rachel Scall, a 26-year-old student at New York University School of Law, thought for years that she didn't care for seltzer. "I didn't really know many people who drank it," she said.

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An expansive list of seltzers with hints of fruit flavor, including cherry pomegranate, can make the sugar- and calorie-free seltzer feel like a treat. PHOTO: POLAR SELTZER

Last year, she was looking for a drink that would help her stay alert during long lectures, but that wasn't filled with caffeine or sugar. She tried seltzer and found it wasn't overly sweet, and the carbonation helped perk her up. She likes flavored seltzers and has pretty much tried them all, including mint chocolate and fudge cheesecake, both seasonal flavors from Polar Beverages in Worcester, Mass.

According to Bruce Bryant, a senior research associate at Philadelphia-based research organization Monell Chemical Senses Center, carbonation triggers a chemical reaction that creates both irritation, commonly referred to as "bite," and a cooling effect in the mouth. CO<sub>2</sub> in a carbonated beverage reacts with enzymes in the tissue of the tongue and creates carbonic acid, which activate pain and cool-sensing nerves that can make drinks seem colder, Mr. Bryant said.

"Carbonation certainly perks things up," said Mr. Bryant, who has researched the topic on and off for about 20 years. "It adds another sensory dimension."

Carbonation results in a slight aftertaste that some people like.

Dr Pepper Snapple Group Inc. is expanding the distribution across the U.S. of its seltzer brands, which include Schweppes and Canada Dry, to meet growing demand, a spokesman says. "We're beginning to invest in some targeted advertising in the seltzer category as we continue focusing on growing distribution, availability and trial."

Nestlé SA says it is launching more sparkling water flavors, including green-apple and lemon-orange flavors for Perrier.

Nicholas Fortugno, 40 years old, makes his own seltzer at home using a SodaStream machine, which allows users to carbonate water at home and add in flavoring to make different types of soda. He drinks about two liters a day of plain seltzer, carbonated with what he describes as "harsh bubbles."

"I like the tang of bubbles over water," said Mr. Fortugno, co-founder of the gaming company Playmatics who lives in New York City. "I like that it's zero calories and purely hydrating without being completely tasteless."



Several beverages, including tonic water, that look like seltzer contain other ingredients. PHOTO: DR PEPPER SNAPPLE GROUP



Sparkling mineral waters from springs, like Perrier, have other minerals, too. PHOTO: NO CREDIT AVAILABLE

Some seltzer fans feel nostalgia for soda-fountain drinks like cherry-lime rickeys. There is also a whiff of the 1980s, when Perrier captured yuppies' attention with its European cachet.

Perrier had a

widespread recall in 1990 after benzene was detected in some of its bottles, which hampered its sales. Meanwhile, still bottled waters, like Evian, became the new status beverage.

Barry Joseph, an associate director at the American Museum of Natural History in New



Club soda is seltzer with added sodium. PHOTO: DR PEPPER SNAPPLE GROUP

York, began researching seltzer more than a decade ago after writing a review of a SodaStream machine for a Jewish news site. In response, he heard from dozens of people who wanted to share memories—of seltzer delivery men injured by exploding bottles and childhood egg creams, the combination of milk, chocolate syrup and seltzer that tastes like fizzy chocolate milk.

Mr. Joseph has written a book-length history of the beverage and is working to get it published. He says soda water was invented by Joseph Priestley, an 18th century theologian and chemist credited with discovering oxygen, who found a way to

infuse water with fixed air. Several years later, Johann Jacob Schweppe, for whom the Schweppes brand is named, founded the technique to mass-produce fizzy water. The rise in inventive and homemade cocktails has helped draw more people to seltzer, Mr. Joseph says.

Brooklyn Seltzer Boys is an old-school seltzer delivery business launched about two years ago by the owners of Gomberg Seltzer Works. Gomberg Seltzer has been filling up seltzer bottles for the handful of delivery men still operating in New York for more than 50 years, but had never delivered seltzer to homes or businesses.

Alex Gomberg, the great-grandson of company founder Mo Gomberg, decided after finishing a master's degree at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 2012 to try his hand at modernizing seltzer delivery with his father and uncle.

Over the past few months, the company has seen demand surge and now has a wait list for residential delivery. "We're slammed," he said.

The company's cramped Canarsie facility is packed with thousands of old-fashioned glass bottles, some emerald green, some a pale shade of blue and some still bearing the logo of now-retired seltzermen who sold them to the family. Mr. Gomberg said the handblown siphon bottles hold 60 pounds of pressure and allow very little carbonation to escape, helping maintain a drink's "bite" long after the seltzer in plastic bottles has gone flat.

A clunky metal machine from the early 1900s connected to a tangle of pipes rotates the seltzer bottles around, filling each with carbonated water. The thick glass bottles—the kind the Three Stooges would spray each other with—are placed 10 to a wooden crate and carted off to doorman buildings in downtown Brooklyn and upscale Manhattan restaurants that will sell them to customers for \$15 a bottle.

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