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## Root beer, the season's go-to flavor

By *Stephanie Witt Sedgwick*  
Special to The Washington Post  
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Take a sip of your favorite root beer. What does it taste like, besides familiar? Wintergreen, licorice, cherry, ginger, vanilla and nutmeg are among the most prevalent notes, and they make root beer a worthy flavor component for cooking and baking.



Root Beer Pinwheel Cookies (James M. Thresher for The Washington Post)

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Particularly right now. Its retro taste, all-American appeal and deep spiciness seem tailor-made for fall.

Root beer's signature tang originally came from sassafras, sarsaparilla and other roots and barks that were used in the late 1800s when the drink was first commercially produced. Chris Reed, head of the Los Angeles company behind Virgil's microbrewed root beer, says his brewers still follow a traditional recipe. But most modern-day store-bought root beer is a blend of natural and artificial flavorings, plus fizzy water and a sweetener, either corn syrup or cane sugar.

At the local Firehook Bakery chain, Kate Jansen, part-owner and head of product development, was looking to create items that could be promoted for national holidays when she added root-beer-flavored baked goods to the repertoire. But customers were way ahead of her, says Debbie Schoch, Firehook's catering manager.

"I was getting calls from people asking whether we had any root beer items available even before Kate came up with the idea for the root beer cakes," Schoch says.

Root beer as a baking flavor is a go-to staple, says Sallee McCarthy, owner of Fran's

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Cake and Candy Supplies in Fairfax City. "It's extremely popular, especially at the holidays for making root beer cakes, cookies and all sorts of good stuff."

Heading into November and December, she says, she receives as many as 10 calls a day from customers looking for root beer extract, which is not usually available in the supermarket's baking aisle.

To achieve deep root-beer flavor in baked goods, that extract is a must. At Buzz Bakery in Alexandria, former head chef Josh Short decided to make root beer marshmallows. He started by boiling down root beer to make a syrup, but what he produced didn't pack enough of a punch. Finally, he found root beer extract from Cook's Flavoring Co. (See [ordering information](#).) That solved the problem and launched an unexpected hit for Short, who'd been experimenting with the flavor just for fun, for a seasonal summer treat.

"The idea was to take a root beer float and turn it into a marshmallow. We were surprised at how well it sold," he says. Since then, the bakery has moved on to Guinness- and Norton-wine-flavored marshmallows.

The taste of a root beer float taps directly into the nostalgia market. Sandy Roberts, a 54-year-old fitness instructor in Rockville, and her husband are huge fans. It's the dessert they serve at home whenever they want to impress: "It's fun, it taste good and it reminds people of happy childhood memories," she says.

Thirteen-year-old Clara MacKenzie is into the taste of root beer, straight up. She lives in Paris with her D.C.-native mom, Mae MacKenzie. They can't find root beer in France, so their American friends collect a variety of brands for the MacKenzies to sample when they visit Washington every summer.

Clara appreciates the range of microbrews and specialty bottles, but A&W remains her favorite: "It's creamy, smooth and for me, it has the original taste I love," she says.

She inspired a root beer taste test; the results are [here](#).

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*Sedgwick writes the Food section's weekly Nourish column.*

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