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Spicy, retro root beer perfect for fall

This old favorite a flavorful addition to cakes, cookies and even pork chops

BY *STEPHANIE WITT SEDGWICK, Special to The Washington Post*
Wednesday, December 1, 2010

4 Comment(s)



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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.

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.

Root beer as a baking flavor is a go-to staple, says Sallee McCarthy, owner of Fran's Cake and Candy Supplies in suburban Washington. "It's extremely popular, especially at the holidays for making root beer cakes, cookies and all sorts of good stuff."

During November and December, she receives as many as 10 calls a day from customers looking for root beer extract, which is usually unavailable in the supermarket's baking aisle.

Taste test

Discovering root beer is a lot like getting turned on to craft beer. Its distinct, variable traits include color, carbonation level, sweetness and flavor agents. In our recent tasting of 22 brands, the differences were apparent.

Our panel of 10 tasters ranged from ages 11 to 63. All the root beers were chilled but not poured over ice. In the first round, the panelists discussed their preferences after each blind tasting. Once the field was narrowed to the semifinal top four root beers (Dominion, Saranac, Stewart's Fountain Classics and Mug), a supermarket brand (Wegmans) was added as a control to see whether a bland, sweet soda

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Business

would be well considered. The finalists' blind tasting was done without discussion or note comparison.

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Multimedia

-- Personal preferences in flavor notes had a great impact. For example, licorice lovers went for Virgil's; mint fans liked Hansen's Natural.

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Entertainment

-- Supermarket-brand root beers all tasted the same and were popular with the younger panel members.

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Contenders fell into two categories: those made with cane sugar and those made with corn syrup. The judges chose a favorite in each category.

Dominion Root Beer, made in Dover, Del., led the cane sugar brews. Tasters felt it was a strong, good soda with a classic root beer flavor. Its one flaw was that it wasn't as carbonated as they would have liked. There were 10 other root beers in this category (in alphabetical order): Abita, Boylan, Hansen's, Jones Soda Co., Maine, Natural Brew Draft, Virgil's, Virgil's Nutmeg, Wild Bill's and Whole Foods Brand 365.

Saranac, made in Utica, N.Y., led the corn syrup brews. It was described as an all-American, smooth root beer, with a light molasses background flavor, good head and attractive color. There were 10 others this category (in alphabetical order): A&W, Barq's, Dr. Brown's, Giant, IBC, Mug, Safeway, Sprecher, Stewart's Fountain Classics and Wegmans.

In the final tasting, Saranac won.

Features

If your favorite root beer is not available locally, you can go to PopSoda.com and order regional favorites.

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Supplements

Pork Chops With Sweet Onions Cooked in Root Beer

4 servings

This is a take on pork cooked in beer. The root beer adds a lovely spice flavor, especially to the onion. The cooking method keeps the chops moist, and the jus formed by the root beer becomes a simple sauce.

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Ingredients

- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 4 (5- to 6-ounce) bone-in pork chops, trimmed of excess fat
- 1/4 teaspoon salt, divided
- Freshly ground black pepper

Blogs

- 1 large sweet onion, cut in half, then into thin slices
- 1 1/2 cups root beer
- 2 teaspoons Dijon-style mustard
- 1 tablespoon light or dark brown sugar, or more to taste

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Directions

Heat the oil in a large, shallow braising pan or skillet over medium-high heat. Season the pork chops with 1/8 teaspoon salt; add pepper to taste.

When the pan or skillet is hot, add the pork chops. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes on the first side, until browned. Turn the chops over and cook for 2 to 3 minutes to brown the second side. Transfer the meat to a plate.

Editorial

Add the onion to the pan or skillet along with the remaining 1/8 teaspoon of the salt. Adjust the heat as needed so the onion cooks but does not brown. Cook for about 10 minutes, until the onion has completely softened. Add the root beer, mustard and brown sugar; stir to combine. Bring the liquid to a boil and return the pork chops to the pan or skillet. Cover; adjust the heat so the liquid stays at a low boil.

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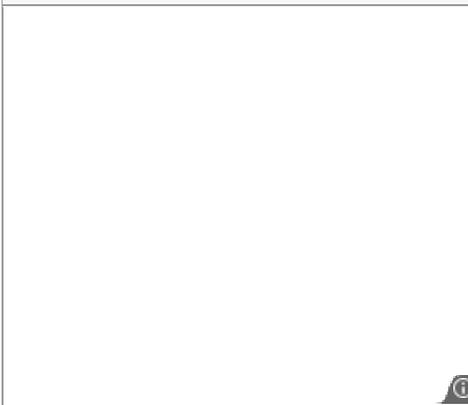
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Increase the heat to high so the cooking liquid in the pan or skillet comes to a boil. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes, until it reduces by half. Taste, and adjust the seasoning as needed. Place a pork chop on each serving plate. Spoon the sauce and onion over the chop; serve warm.

Root Beer Pinwheel Cookies

Makes about 52 cookies

Make ahead: Store for a few weeks in an airtight container at room temperature. Adapted from a recipe in Maida Heatter's "Book of Great Cookies" (Knopf, 1978).

Ingredients

- 1 3/4 cups flour
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1 large egg
- 3/4 teaspoon root beer extract

Directions

Whisk together the flour, baking powder and salt in a medium bowl. Place the butter in the bowl of a stand mixer or hand-held electric mixer; beat on medium speed for 2 to 3 minutes, until it is smooth and creamy. Add the vanilla extract and sugar; beat to incorporate, then add the egg and beat to combine. Reduce the speed to low; slowly add the flour mixture and mix just until the dry ingredients are incorporated.

Transfer half of the dough to a mixing bowl; add the root beer extract. Knead the extract into the dough until blended. The dough will look slightly marbled; that's OK.

Cut four 20-inch pieces of parchment paper. Working with one dough half at a time, place the dough between two of the sheets and pat down to form a flat disk. Use a rolling pin to roll the dough into a thin oblong about 14 by 17 inches. Repeat with the remaining dough.

Remove the parchment from the root beer dough. Remove the top sheet of parchment from the plain dough. Place the root beer dough on top of the plain dough so they align as closely as possible. Trim away any excess edges.

Starting with the long side facing you, roll the layered dough into a tight jellyroll, peeling it off the parchment as you go. Trim the ends of the roll neatly. Roll up the dough in the parchment paper, twisting the ends to seal the cylinder of dough.

Transfer to the freezer for at least 1 hour and up to 2 days. Placing the roll in the cardboard tube of a paper towel roll or wrapping paper roll will help the roll of dough keep its shape.

When ready to bake, preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper.

Unwrap the dough rolls from the freezer and place on a cutting board. Use a thin, sharp knife to cut the dough into 1/3-inch-thick slices. Arrange on the baking sheets spaced 1 inch apart. Bake 1 sheet at a time for 10 to 12 minutes, until the cookies just start to brown at the edges. Use a spatula to transfer to a wire rack to cool before serving or storing.

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