



Sarsaparilla, birch beer and ginger ale oh my! Part 2

Mon Nov 24, 2008 at 11:00:10 AM

By OWEN MORRIS



Last Friday I [discussed the intricacies](#) of birch beer versus sarsaparilla versus root beer and today I'm tackling ginger. As in ginger beer and ginger ale.

What's the difference? First, there's the alcohol. Many ginger beers have the stuff while no ginger ale does. Then there's the ginger itself. Ginger beer traditionally has more of the herb. For instance, the difference between Reed's Ginger Ale and Reed's Ginger Beer is 17 grams of ginger per 12 ounce bottle and the beer has 25 grams, giving it a more pungent ginger taste. Finally, there are the spices. Ginger Ale traditionally has other spices added, such as lemon or honey while ginger beer tends to only contain ginger, or low amounts of other spices.

For the taste test I was unable to find any ginger beers.

Strike that. I was able to find alcoholic ginger beers, but I wanted this taste test to be all non-alcoholic. I did find Reed's ginger ale, Sprecher's ginger ale, Natural Brew ginger ale and the original ginger ale, Vernors.

From last to first:

Vernors: "That's closer to piss." The self-proclaimed oldest soft drink in the country and a Michigan favorite, it tastes closer to Lake Michigan than a normal ginger ale. "There's no ginger in it," one taster noticed after looking at the label. It's overly sweet without containing very much flavor. "Tastes like a flat tootsie-pop."

Sprecher: "Smells great, like what I imagine all ginger ales to smell like," a taster noted before taking back the compliment: "but the taste does not match. No flavor and too much carbonation." Sprecher received low marks on all reviewer's sheets.

Reed's: Even though Reed's original ginger ale is only medium-strength for the company, the ginger tastes really comes through. But it's more like a fruit juice/ginger hybrid. Reed's got high marks by some reviewers who championed its unique flavor, saying, "it doesn't taste like every other ginger ale but I like it." Other tasters disagreed: "When you smell it, it smells like sticking your head into a bag of stale Lay's potato chips." This was the most divisive ginger-ale by far.

Natural Brew: "Mmmmm ... that has a lot of ginger." Natural Brew's ginger tasted like what I expect a mom-and-pop's

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homemade ginger ale to taste like. It has the ginger flavor, the right level of carbonation, a hint of lemon, and the sweetness level is just right. "It's the only one I could drink more than one of. Or would want too," said one taster. Natural Brew's ginger ale wins by default for not offending anyone.

A few notes on the tasting:

If you remember this [root beer tasting](#) I conducted a few months back, Natural Brew's root beer was ranked dead-last and given the official title of shitty. Sprecher's root beer, on the other hand, was praised and came in at number two. (It did better in the *New York Times* test, which ranked it **number one** among 25 contenders.) With ginger ale that's reversed. While I wouldn't describe Sprecher's ginger ale as shitty, it's not far. Natural Brew's ginger ale, on the other hand, is refreshing, crisp and tastes unmistakably like ginger without overwhelming the tastes.

A good root-beer brewer does not make a good ginger-ale brewer and vice-versa.

Tags: [ginger](#), [ginger ale](#), [Natural Brew](#), [Reed's](#), [Sprecher](#), [Vernor's](#)
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[james](#) says:

In the future, Cosentino's usually has Cock & Bull ginger beer. Also, HyVees occasionally have Stewart's ginger beer, but I've had no luck lately. Also, the big Chinese market in the river market has some brand. Even super target carries their own Archer Farms brand of ginger beer. I probably seem a bit excessive but I own my own copper moscow mule cups and constantly search for good ginger beer. The presence or absence of ginger beer on the shelf is my new measure of the quality of grocery stores.

Posted at: [November 26, 2008 2:23 PM](#)

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