

Original Story URL:

<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=730883>

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Returns keep bottlers afloat

Small-scale sodas rely on patrons' care in collecting bottle deposits

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Posted: March 22, 2008

Every bottle of Twig's soda sold puts a little more money into Dan Hartwig's pocket.

But every time a Twig's bottle is broken, tossed into a trash can, or otherwise not returned, it becomes a bit more expensive for Hartwig to operate his business. His Shawano company, Twig's Beverage Inc., is among a handful of small soda-makers nationwide that still use returnable glass bottles.

Two companies that use returnable bottles have hung on in Wisconsin, about 30 miles apart in Shawano and Seymour. Twig's Beverage and Seymour Beverages aren't exactly household names in a world dominated by Pepsi, Coca-Cola and other conglomerates that sell nearly all their wares in plastic bottles and aluminum cans. But the two little Wisconsin bottlers have their devotees among those who crave the taste of soda made with sugar - instead of corn syrup - and packaged in glass.

"It gives it a better, crisper taste," Twig's and Seymour fan Brent Barber says about sodas made with sugar. Packaging pop in bottles helps preserve the freshness, he said.

"I've had stuff 2 years old, and you pop it right open and it still has its fizz," said Barber, an Indiana teacher who operates a Web site, www.glassbottlesoda.org. Barber stocks up on Twig's and Seymour sodas during summer sojourns to Wisconsin.

Barber's Web site lists 80 glass soda bottlers nationwide, including just eight companies that still use returnable bottles.

Until fairly recently, Wisconsin had four such companies. But Celo Bottling Co. of Sauk City stopped operations in 2007 after owner George Koehler died. New London Kist Bottling Co. of New London shut down on Jan. 8, said Donna Gilson, spokeswoman for the state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. New London Kist's owner, Keith Wochinski, couldn't be reached for comment.

Kist bottled Ting soda, long popular in the Appleton area. Chicagoan Gemma Petrie discovered Ting during family vacations to Waupaca County, and says a glass bottle provides soda with a "cleaner" taste than a plastic bottle or aluminum can.

Petrie, who operates a nonprofit neighborhood group, wrote about Ting on her food blog, www.probonobaker.com. Her blog entry drew around two dozen responses from people, many of them nostalgic about their days of growing up in Wisconsin and drinking Ting.

That reaction doesn't surprise John Sicher, editor and publisher of Beverage Digest.

"A lot of people still like glass bottles," Sicher said. "To many people, they denote quality."

Main challenges

The amount of soda sold in glass bottles today is so small that no one bothers to track it, Sicher said. The trend away from glass began over two decades ago, as soda-makers turned increasingly to cheaper aluminum cans and then to plastic bottles.

There are still higher-end soda-makers that use glass bottles, including national players like IBC and Stewart's, along with regional soda-makers. Some craft brewers, including Glendale-based Sprecher Brewing Co. and Stevens Point Brewery, also make root beer and other sodas sold at higher prices in non-returnable glass bottles.

But many of those sodas use high fructose corn syrup, instead of sugar, as a sweetener. The use of sugar helps separate Twig soda from its competitors, Hartwig said.

"People like that flavor better," he said.

Twig bottles Sundrop, a lemon soda with Southern roots, under a license with beverage giant Dr. Pepper Snapple Group, a company in Plano, Texas, that counts 7UP, IBC and Stewart's among its brands. Twig also has its own brands, Twig's and Hill Billy, which include root beer and other flavors. Twig, with 10 employees, sells Sundrop in non-returnable bottles as far away as the Milwaukee area, but the soda sold in returnable glass bottles is largely confined to Shawano and Waupaca counties.

"We don't want to go too far," Hartwig said. "It's hard to get the bottles back."

That's one of the main challenges to relying on returnable bottles. For years, Twig charged a \$4 bottle deposit whenever a customer bought a case. Hartwig in 2004 raised that deposit to \$10, and that's helped improve the return rate.

But it still costs the company \$12 to replace a case of 24 bottles. So every bottle that isn't returned, and has to be replaced with a new one, shaves a bit more off the company's bottom line.

Smaller size

Seymour Beverages owner Mel Kuske restricts his sales accounts to grocery stores and taverns within 30 miles of Seymour because "that's all we can handle."

"We've got our customers, and that's it," said Kuske, whose only full-time employee is his son. "We don't want to expand."

Like Twig, Seymour Beverages makes its root beer, wild cherry and other sodas with sugar instead of corn syrup. Seymour Beverages bottles under the Seymour Soda brand, as well as defunct brands that are revived under whatever bottles Kuske manages to scrounge.

His warehouse resembles a living history museum for sodas, including pop bottled under names such as Paul's of New Castle, Pa.; Black Rock of Buffalo, N.Y., and Paramount of Kenosha. A new find includes the Little Chute brand, with bottles that have a painted label featuring an American Indian standing near a river. Kuske recently bought the empty bottles from a collector who had kept them in storage for several years.

Kuske's mainstay is a 7-ounce bottle, which he calls a "kid-size bottle." That smaller size appeals to parents who don't want their children drinking the industry standard 12-ounce bottle, he said.

Teri Kinart, a Brookfield real estate agent, agrees. She was stocking up on several cases at Seymour Beverages last week, saying the 7-ounce size is "perfect for kids."

Kinart had traveled to Seymour with her friend, John Cardo of Sussex. Cardo discovered Seymour Beverages last fall when someone recommended it as a good source for lime soda, his favorite soft drink. Cardo used to drink lime soda bottled by Oak Creek-based Black Bear Bottling LLC but dropped that brand years ago when Black Bear switched to plastic bottles for lime and most of its other flavors.

"There's no good beverage that comes out of plastic, in my opinion," said Cardo, a factory supervisor.

Both Kuske and Hartwig say they have no plans to stop using glass bottles, despite the extra work involved with handling returns.

"It's what we're known for," Hartwig said.