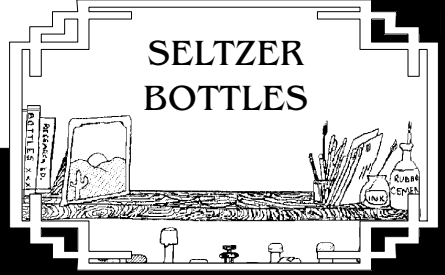


Bryan's TOP Shelf



by Bryan Grapentine

What started as a system to purify water later became a favorite drink and favorite bottle collecting speciality. Seltzer collecting is as varied as any speciality field and has a rich and interesting history. Here's to your health!

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Seltzer water is rich in European tradition. Early European water systems were often contaminated with harmful bacteria and since carbonation kills germs in water, it was believed that the higher the carbonation, the purer the water.

During the 1700s English scientist Joseph Priestley wrote the first paper describing how to "impregnate" water with air. Thus it's not surprising to learn that in 1773, in London, Jacob Schweppe (founder of the company that still bears his name) produced and sold carbonated water. Schweppe recommended seltzer for its pleasant taste and medicinal virtues. It was ascribed a wide range of uses including: feverish ailments, biliousness, nervous affections and the debilitating consequences of hard living. It was described as "a safe and cooling drink for persons exhausted by much speaking, heated by dancing or when quitting a hot room or crowded assemblies". A handbill published in 1798 says that Schweppe's seltzer and soda waters could be mixed with milk, wine or spirits. This was the first known promotion of the use of seltzer as a mixer.

Bottled carbonated water sold well but the bottle design needed improvement. There was no way to re-cork the bottle to save its contents for future use. Once uncorked it was only a short time until the sparkling water became flat.

In 1813, Charles Plinth solved these problems with the invention of "Plinth's Portable Fountains", a device which enabled a portion of a bottle's contents to be dispensed while preserving the rest for another time. The modern-day syphon was born in 1829 when two Frenchmen patented a hollow corkscrew which was inserted through the cork into the charged bottle of soda water, the spout portion of the corkscrew containing a spring-operated valve. Thus, the liquid was able to escape the bottle only through release of the valve. By the late 1830s

syphon bottles of the same basic design of those in use at the turn of the 19th century became standard.

The name "Seltzer" came from the tiny West German town of Niederselters. "Seltser", as the drink was then called, was a favorite of Eastern European Jews who brought the idea to the United States in the late 1800s. In an attempt to re-create seltzer in their new homeland, they carbonated well water using established carbonation technology, giving it the Yiddish name "Seltzer". Commercial seltzer was simply plain carbonated water similar to soda water sold in bottles today.

The 1920s and 30s were the seltzers' heyday in the United States. Thousand of bottlers were delivering seltzer to homes, hotels, bars, and corner soda fountains, a practice still carried on today in some areas. The wealthier establishments spritzed their seltzer from elegantly etched bottles that displayed their names. These bottles were referred to as either seltzer or syphon bottles.

A rather unusual advantage of the syphon bottle was its use as a fire extinguisher. Being filled with carbonic acid gas and water, both of which are non-combustible, the syphon was promoted as a suitable substitute for the other fire extinguishers of the day. The drinking public had only to keep on hand several full syphons for use in quenching a thirst or putting out a lively blaze.

Easterners may remember the nickname "Two Cents Plain", the price



years ago for a tall glass of seltzer with no flavored syrup added. For a penny more you could buy an egg cream, a delightfully sweet combination of milk, chocolate syrup and seltzer.

Some people actually grew dependent on seltzer. Whether it was due to their cultural upbringing or just to a bad case of heartburn, seltzer offered a unique form of "fizzical" therapy.

By the 1940s the seltzer trade was nearly extinct. There were several reasons for the seltzer's disappearance. Many of the seltzer bottle manufacturers - the bulk of them in Czechoslovakia - were destroyed during World War II. During this same period, production of war materials shut down American bottle production. Mainly, it was the production of flavored sodas for soda fountains and those bottled for home use that left the industry flat.

The rising cost of materials combined with falling profits eventually shut down the larger industry for good. Today, seltzer bottles can be refilled only in a few of the larger cities such as New York and Los Angeles. Interest in Seltzer has been somewhat reborn with the appearance of seltzer in disposable plastic bottles with re-usable heads. This product was introduced by McKesson Corporation in many cities in 1989 and is available in many supermarkets.

SELTZER BOTTLES AS A COLLECTABLE

Many soda bottle collectors have at least a few seltzer bottles in their collection. Not many specialize in these bottles, perhaps because of their size and weight. The average 32-ounce bottle weighs about five pounds and is 12 inches tall. Many of the old seltzer bottles have survived and are available to collectors. The ACL (applied color label) bottles display better than the acid etched ones as the lettering can be read from a distance. The etched bottles display quite nicely when shoe polish is applied to the etching. Try white polish on the colored bottles and black on the clear bottles. The acid etched bottles are often fancier in shape and color.

Seltzer bottles come in a great variety of shapes, sizes, colors and designs and make a nice addition to any bottle

collection. Common sizes are 16, 28, 32, 37, and 44 ounces.

Most of the colored bottles were made in Czechoslovakia or Austria, with the design and lettering etched in the glass. The country of manufacture is usually etched on the base. Some were neatly made in a turn mold; no seams are visible.

The bottles are made of very durable glass able to withstand internal pressures of 160 pounds per square inch and repeated rough handling. The etching was done with hydrofluoric acid. You can find bottles in most colors except red. Pink is a fairly scarce color. Most American bottles were made of clear glass. Some American bottles were etched, but most have applied color labels. A few of the etched, but more of the ACL bottles have pictures in addition to the lettering. Most of the American bottles that I have seen were made by the Owens-Illinois Glass Co. (1929 - 1966) or the Owens-Illinois Pacific Coast Co. (1932 - 1943). The same Owens mark is embossed on the base of the bottle with a single digit in the 3 o'clock position representing the date of manufacture. It appears that most were made in the 1930s.

Collectors divide seltzers into two broad categories: local bottles and national brands. National brands include Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola, Dr. Pepper, NEHI, Orange Crush and Moxie. Of course these bottles usually include the bottlers name, address, city and

state. Seltzers made for local Coca-Cola bottling companies are a favorite and usually command a high price. Local bottling works often had their own brand of seltzer along with their brands of flavored bottled soda. In addition, many hotels, resorts, bars, and restaurants had bottles custom made for their use. Serious local collectors will usually want an example of each variety of seltzer from their area. This is quite possible from a State such as Arizona where only a dozen different seltzers are known, but probably not practical from a State such as New York where there may be hundreds.

All told the seltzer is an interesting bottle to collect with many variants and a range of prices to interest the novice as well as the dedicated collector.

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