Who Remembers Virginia Dare Soda?

I grew up in the late 1970s and have fond memories of Virginia Dare soda; the wooden crates they came in, the ability to pick, mix and match your flavors, the concept of returning the bottles so they could be re-used.

It was a BIG deal to me and my brother, Mike. Not being pigeon-holed into buying a case of soda of one flavor was pretty darn exciting. You mean, I could not only select a dozen flavors, but I could choose between Lemon-Lime, Strawberry, Cherry, Moxie or other flavors I'd never heard of until Virginia Dare? It was so good, I felt like I was doing something wrong when the new bottles arrived. At the moment I was to reach for my first bottle, I felt like I should confirm with my mom that I wasn't punished for something.

Something about this entire idea put you in a good mood. My brother and I would grab our favorite flavor, debate about which ones were the best and this would always segue into unrelated conversation about who would win in a fight: Spiderman (his favorite) or Superman (my favorite.) Surely it was wasted conversation, as clearly Superman was superior. We would often head outside to spread envy throughout the neighborhood. Success was confirmed by wide-eyed looks and obvious salivation.

There may have even been times where we were suspicious of friends who uncharacteristically requested to head to our house to play. They were definitely trying to get at our Virginia Dare. We knew better though. When that wooden case was empty there may be hours, even horribly long days between replenishment. Not on this watch! Greed and conservation were the name of the game.

Kidding aside, I am sure there are a number of people who recall Virginia Dare that was supplied by the Rodman Club Beverage company on Nash Road. For those generations that came later and missed out on the whole experience, it will be difficult, perhaps impossible to convey it.

I always though Virginia Dare was distinctly New Bedford or Massachusetts. Finding out later that the company bottled in Worcester and was (and still is) based in Brooklyn, New York was a bit like finding out that Santa Claus wasn't real. I felt kind of betrayed. What numbed the betrayal a bit was finding out that the company was incorporated in 1923 under the direction of chemist Bernard H. Smith, a native of Massachusetts.

Crate that the Treasures came in!

Though the company was founded in 1835 as a flavor and extract company, with Smith's direction in 1923 they widened their focus towards the entire food and beverage industry, and even oral care and pharmaceuticals. This came about because one of their primary sellers was wine. Prohibition forced the change. The name, of course, is supposed to be the name of the first English child born in America, daughter of Eleanor and Ananias Dare. More pertinently, the name was chosen for what it symbolized. The Virginia Dare website explains it best:

"The name Virginia Dare came to symbolize wholesomeness and purity, and when Garrett & Company was founded in the region in 1835, the name was adopted as a brand for its wine produced from the native Scuppernong grape.

With the institution of Prohibition in 1919, Garrett & Company was required to reduce the alcohol content of its wine. It was then that they decided to utilize their uncommonly-fine alcohol in the manufacture of flavoring extracts of the best possible quality. Dr. Bernard H. Smith, a noted flavor chemist, was charged with establishing this line of flavors that would carry the name Virginia Dare. With time, the company's flavoring extract business flourished, and in 1923 the Virginia Dare Extract Company was incorporated."

Today Virginia Dare is alive and well, and maintains a 150,000 square foot facility and ships to over a hundred countries. While they have gone far past offering soda, I sure wish someone would bring Virginia Dare sodas back to the area.

For those of you who vaguely recall Virginia Dare, I've assembled a few photos to jog your memory. Take a stroll down memory lane and by all means, PLEASE share any anecdotes you have! Do you still have a wooden case, empty or even unopened bottles? We'd love to hear them. I promise I won't ask to come over and "play"!

For a more in depth background on the history of the company, here is a great resource. A short blog about Brooklyn has some fantastic vintage photos of the facility and a short history as well.

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