

# THIRSTY FOR AN ALTERNATIVE

Taking on big soda with Indie Pop BY WILLIAM KENNEDY

**R**ichard Geil and Melanie Mikell are stoked on soda and passionate about pop. The two can tell you the finer points of varieties of plain tonic water. Their enthusiasm is infectious, like the flavors of their Indie Pop Soda — crisp, refreshing and, most of all, real. It's real because Indie Pop Soda uses food ingredients in their product (imagine that) as opposed to commercial sodas that are extract-based and use chemicals to replicate flavors.

Geil and Mikell are veteran bartenders who became frustrated with being forced to serve “big soda” (Coke, Pepsi and their subsidiaries). “We didn't like the flavor profile,” says Geil. They noted the irony of fine dining restaurants emphasizing organic and local ingredients in food while serving mass-produced corporate pop as a beverage. “We have great food in the Pacific Northwest,” says Mikell, “but nothing as an alternative to the cocktail.”

This frustration inspired both Geil and Mikell to begin experimenting with making their own sodas from organic and locally sourced ingredients. Soon they joined forces and Indie Pop Soda was born.

Indie Pop Soda is to soda what the microbrewery is to beer. “We call it craft soda,” says Geil. So far Indie Pop Soda has the craft soda market cornered because ... well, they're the *only* ones doing what they do — not only in Eugene but almost anywhere. “There's people on the East Coast, I think, doing something similar in their region,” Geil says.

In a culture of convenience stores where Coca-Cola's symbol is an international icon, mom-and-pop soda pop seems like a brand new brand-free phenomenon. But people have been serving up soda for centuries. Fruit-based soft drinks first showed up for sale in the 17th century and were made with water and lemon juice and sweetened with honey. But “big soda” wasn't far behind. A French company received exclusive rights to sell the non-carbonated beverage in 1676.

A unique challenge to making soda with actual ingredients (like blended blackberries) rather than extracts is creating a repeatable product in a world where no two blackberries are the same. “There's a lot of tasting at every step of the process” to ensure consistency, says Mikell. “It's fun.”

At one time using real ingredients in pop wasn't out of the ordinary. In 19th- and early 20th-century America, medicinal “mineral waters” were made with birch bark, dandelion and sarsaparilla and served at pharmacies and soda fountains. It wasn't until post-war America that mass production forced a move away from all-natural flavors and toward chemicals and extracts.

Indie Pop makes their sodas at Nib Restaurant in Eugene and serves them locally with forced carbonation at Rabbit Bistro, Belly and the Party Cart. The project received support almost instantly — with 200 Facebook friends in 24 hours. Both Geil and Mikell say that they feel lucky to live in an area that puts so much emphasis on buying local and values a DIY ethos — especially in the food industry.

Mikell and Geil are developing a gun system to serve Indie Pop's “big five” flavors (cola, diet cola, lemon lime, tonic water and ginger beer) in bars and restaurants regionally. They also see perhaps one day having a storefront where customers could get a growler of their favorite flavor and perhaps even get involved in the hands-on production process.

Indie Pop Soda isn't just for kids — it's also a great mixer in alcoholic beverages like the “gin gin mule” (a simple blend of gin, lime and Indie Pop's ginger beer) and the more mysterious “dark and stormy” (rum and ginger beer.) The gin gin mule refreshes while stimulating taste buds and going down (too) easy. The “dark and stormy” is less refreshing and more of a comforting warm blanket to pass a winter night with. In both drinks the intense real ginger flavor makes commercial ginger ales taste thin and metallic.

The Indie Pop duo has tried more than thirty flavors ranging from conventional (blackberry, watermelon, peach) to the slightly exotic (hops and honey). But Mikell is quick to point out that Indie Pop Soda is not about blowing people's minds with exotic flavors. “We're not making turkey dinner soda,” she jokes. She says their most popular flavors have been grapefruit and cucumber-basil.

What's the craziest flavor the pair have tried? “Cream cheese soda,” says Geil. “It wasn't too bad.” ■



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