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Daily Headlines

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JONES SODA AGAIN RAIDS THE DINNER TABLE FOR IDEAS

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SEATTLE - Jones Soda Co. takes the idea of a liquid diet to a new low. How does Green Bean Casserole Soda strike you? And how about an aggressively buttery-smelling Mashed Potato Soda?

Even the creators of the fizzy concoctions at this small Seattle soda company can hardly stomach the stuff. But last year's unexpected success of the Turkey & Gravy Soda means another round of bizarre food-flavored soft drinks. As an added bonus - they're calorie-free.

This week Jones Soda Co. launches a full meal deal of five Thanksgiving soda flavors, from the bile-colored Green Bean Casserole to the sweet - but slightly sickly - Fruitcake Soda. Last year's Turkey & Gravy is also back on the menu.

If you think it sounds less than appetizing, you're not alone.

"Oh, man, I can't drink that!" cries out company chief executive Peter van Stolk, after pouring himself a drink of mashed potatoes.

To banish the buttery aftertaste, he recommends a chaser of Cranberry Soda, the only one of the holiday bunch that doesn't make you want to pick up a toothbrush.

Drinking last year's savory Turkey & Gravy was no picnic, either, but that didn't stop people from clamoring for it, pushing bidding on auction site eBay Inc. up to \$63 for a two-bottle set.

This year Jones plans to produce up to 15,000 five-packs of the 12-ounce bottles, which come complete with utensils (a straw and a toothpick). The sodas may not be as satisfying as a real holiday meal, but they can boast being both calorie- and carb-free, not to mention vegan and kosher.

Beginning Thursday, they'll be on sale at some Target Corp. stores throughout the country, and at other retailers, for between \$14.95 and \$16.95, with proceeds benefiting Toys for Tots.

Known for its quirky ads and offbeat bottle designs, Jones traces its roots to a soda distribution operation that began in 1987. But it wasn't until the mid-1990s that the company began its own line of sodas, cultivating a following among skaters, surfers and snowboarders with unusual flavors like blue bubble gum, green apple and watermelon. These days, Jones soda, juice and energy drinks are available nationwide at stores including Target, Albertson's and Safeway.

Five tasters were assigned to the task of perfecting the holiday flavors, although van Stolk said most other employees ended up trying the sodas



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sooner or later.

In the early stages, the staff grew deeply divided over mashed potato versus sweet potato: "It was like red versus blue," van Stolk said, referring to the recent presidential election.

In the end, he called it for mashed potato, arguing it was the more familiar food.

Jones isn't the only company to find that people have a certain fascination with foods that make you go "yuck." There's the real-life version of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, made famous by the Harry Potter books and featuring tastes like Vomit, Booger and Earthworm. And millions of Americans regularly tune in to reality shows to watch contestants eat things like spiders and snails.

Experts say part of the human fascination with such foods is the omnivore's natural tendency to try a varied diet. But there's also a certain group of people who are simply novelty seekers who get a thrill out of more extreme gastronomical adventures, said Virginia Utermohlen, an associate professor of nutritional sciences at Cornell University.

For those people, she said, the thinking is, "So long as I know it's not going to kill me, it might be just interesting."

Barbara Rolls, nutritional sciences professor at Penn State University, said research shows young people are more likely to try new foods, but she speculates it's not just nature.

"It's that bravado factor," she said.

And for some, Rolls added, the risk will have a reward.

"Who knows, maybe it really tastes good," she said.

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