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## Early pop stars of the soda counter

By Michael Canning

Subs-N-Such is a serious soda boutique with a small sandwich problem.

There's nothing in the name that tells you it's "home of the world's largest soft drink selection," as the menu states. But Subs-N-Such is that rare lunch spot that relies on its food, not drink, sales to stay, er, liquid. That's because the majority of the drink stock, which owner John Lockhart says varies from 300 to 600 varieties, is not what you'd find at most fountains or local store shelves.

No, Subs-N-Such churns out hearty sandwiches mainly so Lockhart has a place to trade on his personal passion, soft drink collecting. He routinely drives to all corners of the country in search of rare, forgotten, or otherwise obscure soft drinks, buys them in bulk, then drives back to stock his restaurant's coolers.

Browsing them can give you a minor education in American "pop" culture history. Some drinks that you've only seen on tin signs in antique shops will be stocked right before you, frosty and ready to be cracked open.

\* Like **birch beers**, the wintergreen flavored cousin of root beer. How many of you have ever even had a birch beer? Lockhart always has a few on hand, such as **Weis Choice** white birch beer from Pennsylvania; **Pennsylvania Dutch Birch Beer**; **Boylan's** red and white birch beer (made, like all of Boylan's sodas, with cane sugar rather than high fructose corn syrup. Lockhart said this gives the soda a crisper taste.); and **Sioux City Birch Beer**, a product of the 130-year-old White Rock beverage company of New York.



\* Root beers themselves are Lockhart's biggest sellers. Currently he stocks **Abita**, made with "pure Louisiana cane sugar," the bottle says, from Abita Springs, La.; an entry from Canada's hip **Jones Soda Co.**, which we picked because it has a picture of someone's kitty on the bottle (Jones regularly solicits home photography from its customers for its bottles and Web site); and **Dominion** root beer by Virginia beer maker Old Dominion Brewing Co., which is sweetened with honey, giving it a "darker flavor like a beer," said Lockhart.



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\* Some of the more bizarre picks: **Dr. Brown's Cel-Ray**, a celery soda with other natural flavors. We gave a Lockhart a funny look. "It's a New York thing," he said.

\* There are two bubble gum entries in Lockhart's cooler, one new, one old: Jones Soda Co.'s bubble gum, and **Big Red**, and Texas favorite since 1937.

\* Few rites of summer are more sacred than chomping into a juicy slice of watermelon. So if you're caught drinking a **Lanio watermelon soda**, mention seeds or sticky hands as an excuse. It's from Miami, the distribution hub of many sodas with Latin American roots.

\* Before Coke and Pepsi, there was **Moxie** soda. One of Maine's claims to fame remains the country's oldest continually produced soda, since 1884. It apparently still tastes like it was formulated in the 19th century. Lockhart said "It's an acquired taste," like a combination of ginger ale, root beer and cherry cough syrup.



\* Remember **Ale-8?** Unless you're from Kentucky, you probably regard it as an abortive attempt in 1980 to launch "the soft drink of tomorrow," complete with a kitschy new wave rock commercial ("You can give it to your girl or share it with a squirrel!"). Kentucky natives know it as **Ale-8-One**, the ginger ale-based beverage that's been bottled in Winchester, Ky., since 1926.

Ale-8-One's formula is still secret, but its unique taste is commonly attributed to citrus additives. It also has caffeine, a rare ingredient for ginger ale.

\* And no trip down soda pop's memory lane would be complete without **Cheerwine**. The 1917 formula from North Carolina is still being bottled. It's for cherry cola lovers. "It's more cherry than Cherry Coke," said Lockhart.

Subs-N-Such also has a Web site: [www.sodamania.com](http://www.sodamania.com)

Subs-N-Such

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