

FIZZ UP YOUR MENU WITH SOFT DRINKS

'Posh pop' now comes in unusual flavours, such as blackcurrant and coffee or cucumber, and has been embraced by diners as a healthy alternative to alcohol, so why are some operators still offering the same old colas, water and fruit juices? asks *Ian Boughton*

Things are moving in the world of soft drinks – but to the exasperation of suppliers, the catering trade is not moving with it.

Claire Martinsen, inventor of 'posh pop' at Breckland Orchard, has illustrated the extent of the change with her comparison between the way things were in 2004 and the way they are in 2014.

She says: "Adult soft drinks are a dynamic and growing sector in the market, but foodservice operators have been slow to realise the changing consumer landscape.

"Alcohol patterns have changed rapidly – about 19% of the UK population don't drink alcohol at all, which often surprises people. The 2014 consumer is more likely to be looking to detox when out of home, but foodservice operators have been slow to reflect this in their soft drink offering.

"The food consumer is more adventurous taste-wise, and menu ingredients that were new in 2004 are now staples in 2014 – but this change in palate has not been reflected by operators in their soft drinks.

"It would be unacceptable to offer a cup of instant coffee in 2014, but they present the same range of soft drinks as in 2004. Colas, water, and fruit juices by the huge multinational brands still remain the cornerstone of a 'soft drinks menu' in many outlets."

This is a distinct shift, says Martinsen. "The world of soft drinks has been changing with the rapid rise in popularity of 'adult' soft drinks.

"These drinks are meeting modern consumer needs in a way that the big long-established ones just don't – more sophisticated flavours, more pairings with food, better provenance and



well-chosen ingredients, production by small, independent family-owned firms, a clear premium and 'different' offer.

Martinsen adds: "In a sea of mediocre ranges, these drinks make an outlet stand out and drive increased loyalty from

non-drinkers, who are surprised but delighted to find them, and they encourage a more 'family' market. Soft-drink service has to become more about 2014 than 2004."

The percentage of adults who do not drink alcohol is placed

CORDIALS WITH COCKTAILS



The image of the cordial or dilutable fruit drink has suffered from the memories of sweet, syrupy squash from childhood. Today, several soft-drink brands will argue that the new cordial is entirely different, with a variety of uses.

Typically, Bottlegreen's cordials are used by the Soho House group of hotels, restaurants and private clubs, where bars manager Tom Kerr is keen on the opportunities they give for flavouring.

"Cordials are fantastic for cocktails, and the Grey Goose is one of our highest-sellers. This is vodka, lime juice, Bottlegreen's elderflower cordial and soda water."

However, he says, choose your cordial carefully. "The concept of something dilutable to add flavour is a wonderful idea, but some cordials are thick, gluggy and heavy in the mouth. You must compare your cordials – we blind-tasted five or six elderflowers – and you'll find a clear difference between them."

And unusual cordials give a very unusual opportunity. Bottlegreen has just produced a blackcurrant and coffee cordial, another idea in the quest for an adult profile from a soft drink. It is, says the maker, another example of how many cordials can be used both hot or cold, even if this one tends to be a little polarising in opinions.

"It is intriguing," says Kerr. "We could add some alcohol, depending on how dominant the tastes of the fruit and the coffee are. We might add a fairly neutral spirit to it, a gin or maybe a light rum."



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even higher by Gabriel David, founder of Luscombe Drinks.

By his figures, the non-drinking part of the market could be as high as 30%. To meet this, he has worked with chefs to develop a food-matching guide for soft drinks, arguing that promoting

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**Claire Martinsen,
Breckland Orchard**

this as a genuine alternative offer for patrons who don't drink alcohol is a sound, practical strategy.

FOOD MATCHING

David says he has now demonstrated that preconceptions about soft drinks being over-sweet, flavoured waters are now well out of date, and that he has proved that it is both possible and commercially viable to offer drinks from 'real' ingredients, without additives, to complement a menu.

Luscombe suggests its apple juices can match pork and chicken dishes, Scotch eggs, pork chops with apple sauce, chicken or sausage casserole, and can complement medium-bodied cheeses, leek quiche, leek and potato soup, creamy onion soup, baked onions with cream or a butternut squash risotto.

Luscombe's Sicilian lemonade, which has a 'best organic cold beverage' award, can be presented with Mediterranean flavours – roasted tomatoes, olives, pasta, salad niçoise, or grilled chicken with garlic and herbs.

The brand's lime crush works with Mexican food, such as tortilla chips with fresh tomato salsa and guacamole, tacos and quesadillas,

but also matches anything else with a spicy or chilli twist, as well as goat's cheese.

The St Clements orange and lemon drink pairs with smoked salmon and scrambled egg, frittata or omelette, but also with tempura squid or fresh prawns. Raspberry crush works very well with game terrine, smoked duck, chicken or venison, and cranberry crush works with game.

Luscombe has gained attention for its 'hot' ginger beer – the name refers to the taste, not the temperature – which matches barbecued chicken, anything with a sweet glaze or marinade, or spicy Caribbean-style grilled fish, as well as Chinese sweet and sour dishes and stir-fried crab.

FLOWER POWER

Elderflower, the favourite of so many soft drinks brands, is recommended for 'any occasion when you might drink Champagne', or to serve with canapés.

Elderflower is also the great enthusiasm of Belvoir, which has 90 acres of land growing the flowers and has just brought out a lighter version of its elderflower pressé, its biggest seller.

The key, says Belvoir, is that flower and fruit drinks can be used in more than one way – elderflower cordial, rhubarb and strawberry, and raspberry and rose will all serve as a 'more interesting soft drink' or can be used to make cocktails or a spritzer.

And food matching works, says Belvoir, in some unusual forms – for example, elderflower pressé goes remarkably well with fish and chips.

"We tend to favour food matching, too," says Amanda Grabham, head of marketing at Bottlegreen. "Our flavours are both adult and delicate, so they lend themselves to this. The additional option is as a mixer, but we think of that as a secondary use."

Nevertheless, she confirms, the modern soft drink has to be understood as a versatile product. It is slightly confusing that terms such as pressé are used differently by various makers, but the principle is that the modern soft drink lends itself to creative use.

"Our pressé means a sparkling ready-to-drink product, but it's used in different ways by different brands. We start with real fruit or flowers and end up with a liquid blend. The water source is a spring on our premises, and on sparkling pressés, there's a slight carbonation."

The result is unexpected –



"Food matching works in some unusual forms – for example, elderflower pressé goes remarkably well with fish and chips"



Bottlegreen's elderflower and pomegranate pressé is, according to some consumers, an alternative to a rosé wine. Ginger and lemongrass works in whisky, and its Cox's apple works with brandy.

"Cordials are not used as widely as they might be," says Grabham. "The key thing about our cordials is the viscosity of the liquid, which means we have a 10:1 ratio, or 22 servings to a bottle – which is different to many brands – and is a significant profit margin."

"A growing area is being driven by chefs, who are using our cordials in recipes. We see elderflower being used in salad dressings, or as a sauce for fish, and our ginger and lemongrass cordial works in Thai dishes."

Bottlegreen is not alone in suggesting that caterers look beyond the simple 'soft drink'.

At Qcumber, the drink created from cucumber essence and sparkling spring water, founder Graham Carr-Smith says his product works as both mixer and accompaniment. With gin, it works instead of tonic to create a 'G&Q', and with food it goes well with curries, stir-fries and Thai dishes.

The reason, he says, is that the cucumber drink has a strong cut-through and cleanses the palate.

The next move, says Andrew

Mugadu of Vegesentials, is that the vegetables on the side will not be on a plate but in a glass. His product, already available through retail, is 'half fruit, half veg' juices and smoothies. Typical blends are beetroot, pomegranate and carrot, or celery, apple and kale.

"Typically, when you eat hot, you drink cold, so a coffee with a sandwich," he explains. "Our appeal is in the taste of 'raw' fruit and vegetables, as opposed to pasteurised. Those in the past who have had a fruit juice with their food can now turn to this, and we are now looking at the casual dining market."

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