

Tasty Tonic

Radha Chitale visits the World of Coca-Cola museum to capture the medicine behind the soda-pop.

In downtown Atlanta, Georgia, the World of Coca-Cola museum stands as an interactive homage to one of the world's most famous soft drinks.

But Coca-Cola, which evolved over decades and across continents, began as an experimental tonic concocted by a local pharmacist just a few streets away from the museum.

In the late 1800s, John Pemberton was busy churning out new products – from liver pills to perfumes – that would capture his customers' fancies and wallets at a time when a do-it-yourself approach applied to making and marketing almost anything, including medicines.

Pemberton's new formula contained extracts from the coca plant and, for the first time in a soft drink, the kola nut, among other ingredients. The sweetened syrup was mixed with carbonated water and in 1886, Jacob's Pharmacy in Atlanta became the first drugstore to make and sell Pemberton's Coca-Cola at their attached soda fountain.

"Because it was sitting inside a place where people went to get something that was going to improve their lives and make them a healthier person, the advertising was reflective of the outlet where the product was being sold," said Mr. Phil Mooney, director of the Archives Department and Heritage Communications for The Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta, Georgia, US. "Virtually every soft drink that was available [in the late 19th century offered] the consumer some sort of a functional benefit. And Coca-Cola was no different."

From the start, Pemberton touted Coca-Cola as a "healthful" drink and it was

portrayed as a "brain and nerve tonic," good for relieving fatigue, headache, mental exhaustion and despondency, on top of being "delicious" and "refreshing."

Though the recipe for Coca-Cola remains secret to this day, Pemberton and successive company executives made it known that their drink contained the "tonic properties of the wonderful coca plant and the famous cola nut," according to company letterhead circa 1894.

Coca is an extract of the coca plant, the same plant from which cocaine is made. Cocaine, along with morphine and

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opium, were used frequently and without stigma in the 1880s as analgesics, although Mooney said it was unclear how Pemberton may have been using coca in his recipe at the time.

Another component in Coca-Cola, which provided the boost of energy, was caffeine, derived from the kola nuts. Sugar provided a lift too.

But the promise of health benefits from Coca-Cola was short lived. Bottling shifted Coca-Cola, like many soft drinks, to retail in general stores while the number of soda fountains-cum-pharmacies rapidly declined and the rationale for health-driven advertising disappeared.

By 1907, 1 year after the US Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act, which

restricted advertisers from making undocumented claims about their products, much of the medical language was gone from Coca-Cola advertisements.

Still, "tonic" notions about Coca-Cola persist and Mooney said there is a long tradition of pharmacists giving people Coca-Cola syrup to help aid digestion or ease an upset stomach. However, the Coca-Cola Company never advocated such use and sued retailers who marketed the syrup with medical indications, according to Ms. Crystal Warwell Walker, a company spokesperson.

Eventually, Coca-Cola changed their approach to incorporating medicine in their advertising. Uniformed nurses featured sporadically in occupation-based Coca-Cola advertisements from the 1930s through to the early 1960s.

"The advertising... that features medical professionals is more targeted towards quality and the fact that Coca-Cola does give you a little pick me up..." Mooney said. "[Nursing] is very demanding physically so that is simply a bit of communication that says [Coca-Cola] will help you get through the day."

These advertisements, which show how Coca-Cola related to almost every aspect of modern life from work to athletics and holidays, are on display along with hundreds of other artifacts from Coca-Co-



Image courtesy of The Coca-Cola Company.

la's history in the Milestones of Refreshment gallery at the World of Coca-Cola.

Displays include Pemberton's own written recipes for creams and tinctures, a vintage marble soda counter with an array of fountain spigots, and the Academy Award presented for the 1982 best picture "Gandhi" (the company owned Columbia Pictures at the time).

The highlight of the museum is the Taste It! room where guests can sample 64 varieties of Coca-Cola drinks from around the world, such as Stony Tangawizi, a refreshing ginger beer from Africa or the Inca Kola, a Latin American take on cream soda.

Tour guides offer a strong nudge, disguised as a warning, for guests to taste the Beverly, an Italian aperitif soda. The pithy, citrus and quinine flavor incites identical reactions after tentative sips from the under-12 crowd: a squint of disgust, tongue stuck out and shoulders hunched to the ears.

Other attractions include the Secret Formula 4-D Theater and a Pop Culture gallery featuring images of Coca-Cola by artists such as Norman Rockwell and Andy Warhol. Bottleworks, a microcosmic glimpse of the robotic bottling process used to fill glass bottles of Coca-Cola, is also of interest.

The tour of the World of Coca-Cola ends on the tasting floor where guests can grab a free Coca-Cola on their way out. **MI**



Free, freshly bottled Coca-Cola at the end of the tour.



The Taste It! floor lets guests sample 64 products from around the world.