

THEME: Colonial Life

TOPIC: Making Root Beer

PREPARATION / PROPS: Tables and chairs (or picnic tables) to comfortably fit the number of kids in your group, table coverings, bottles of root beer for decoration, any of the listed herbs or roots you can find

LESSON: Root Beer was developed in the hope it would replace beer in popularity. George Washington, Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson referred to root beer as "small beer". It contained approximately 2% - 12% alcohol. Small beer was a collection of local beverages made during colonial times and it used a variety of herbs, barks and roots. There were different kinds of small beers: birch beer, sarsaparilla beer, ginger beer, and root beer. There is no true authentic root beer recipe, since there are so many different combinations and brews. Over time, root beer has contained ingredients like allspice, birch bark, coriander seed, ginger and ginger root, hops, burdock root, dandelion root, guaiacum chips, Spicewood, wild cherry bark and bitters, wintergreen and wintergreen oil, yellow dock, prickly ash bark and even, molasses. Today, root beer is made from a mixture of flavorings, sweeteners and carbonation. Depending on the brew, bottler and manufacturer, root beer still contains a large number of herbs (burdock root, sarsaparilla root, yellow dock root, ginger root, juniper berries, wild cherry bark, birch bark, etc.), oils (anise, lemon, artificial wintergreen, etc.), sweeteners (sugar, molasses, corn sugar, fructose, aspartame, brown sugar, lactose, malt extract, etc.) and carbonation (yeast, artificial, forced carbonation.)

"Once the colonists settled all over the east coast, they built towns, and they built breweries too. However they were truly pioneers even in the towns, and they did most things for themselves, and that included baking bread and brewing beer at home. Unfortunately they didn't have crops of barley or other grains to use when making their small beer, so they had to use other sweeteners such as honey, molasses, and cane sugar. And they didn't have hops for bitterness, so they had to discover which plants in the new world would provide bitterness and flavor. That is the real beginning of root beer! Many people say that Charles Hires invented root beer, but as you can see, the colonists had been making root beer for 200 years before Charles Hires was born. In fact, there were some commercial root beer brewers such as Caleb Smith, in Flushing, New York, as far back as the 1850's, who produced a fermented draft root beer. However, Mr. Hires was the first to commercially produce root beer in bottles."

DISCUSSION POINTS:

- The colonists did not have the ingredients in America that they normally used to make their small beer so they had to improvise by using plants they discovered here. Improvise means to make due with what you have or can find. Can you think of a time when you had to improvise? How did it turn out?
- Colonists could not go to the grocery store or the soda warehouse and buy a case of root beer. They had to make it. If you had to make your own root beer, do you think you would do it often?

ACTIVITY: Making Root Beer

Materials: You will need the following materials for each group of kids: small bowl, 1 teaspoon dry yeast, ½ cup warm water, 2 cups sugar, spoon to stir, 5 teaspoons Root Beer extract, gallon jug with lid, 8 cups hot water, funnel, small disposable cups

Method: Have the kids help measure, pour, and stir ingredients. In the small bowl combine ½ cup warm water and dry yeast. Stir to dissolve yeast granules and set aside. Pour the sugar, root beer extract and yeast mixture into the gallon jug. Carefully add the hot water using the funnel, replace cap and shake all ingredients until well blended. Set the jug in the sun for a few hours then put into refrigerator until well chilled. The root beer should sit overnight and will be ready to drink the next day. Pour into small cups and enjoy.

You may try having each group make a different recipe and then have a taste test and a vote! See the reference section for links to other recipes. You can even make a cake with root beer and serve that with your beverage.

Root Beer Cake

From Arielle's Recipe Archives

Time: 1-2 hours Serves: 10

Ingredients:

1 ¼ cups all-purpose flour

½ teaspoon baking soda

pinch salt

2 eggs

1 cup root beer (do not use diet)

¾ cup packed light brown sugar

¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter, softened

½ teaspoon pure vanilla extract Heat oven to 350 degrees. Grease an 8-inch spring form pan.

For cake, sift together the flour, baking soda and salt; set aside. Put 1 cup root beer in a small saucepan; boil, uncovered, until it is reduced to ½ cup, about 5 minutes. Cool to lukewarm.

Beat brown sugar and butter in large bowl of an electric mixer on high speed until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes. Add the eggs, one at a time, mixing well after each addition. Stop the mixer and add the reduced root beer and vanilla. Mix just to combine. Fold in the dry ingredients with a rubber spatula.

Transfer batter to prepared pan. Bake until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, 45 to 50 minutes. Cool 5 minutes. Poke holes all over top with a toothpick. Brush with about 3 tablespoons of the root beer. Remove the sides from the pan and cool cake completely.

For frosting, mix 6 tablespoons root beer, confectioners' sugar, butter and vanilla in a small bowl to make a thin frosting. Spread over top of cooled cake, letting it drip down the sides.

REFERENCES: The American Revolution for Kids: A History with 21 activities by Janis Herbert, Bulldogrootbeer.com, http://www.greydragon.org/library/brewing_root_beer.html, http://www.root-beer.org/The_Root-Beer_Gourmet.htm, <http://www.gourmetrootbeer.com/recipes.html>