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BOOKSHELF

Book Review: 'Fizz,' by Tristan Donovan

Joseph Priestly in 1772 showed how to make fizzy water using an apparatus of glass, a pig's bladder, leather pipe, cork and a quill.

By MARC LEVINSON

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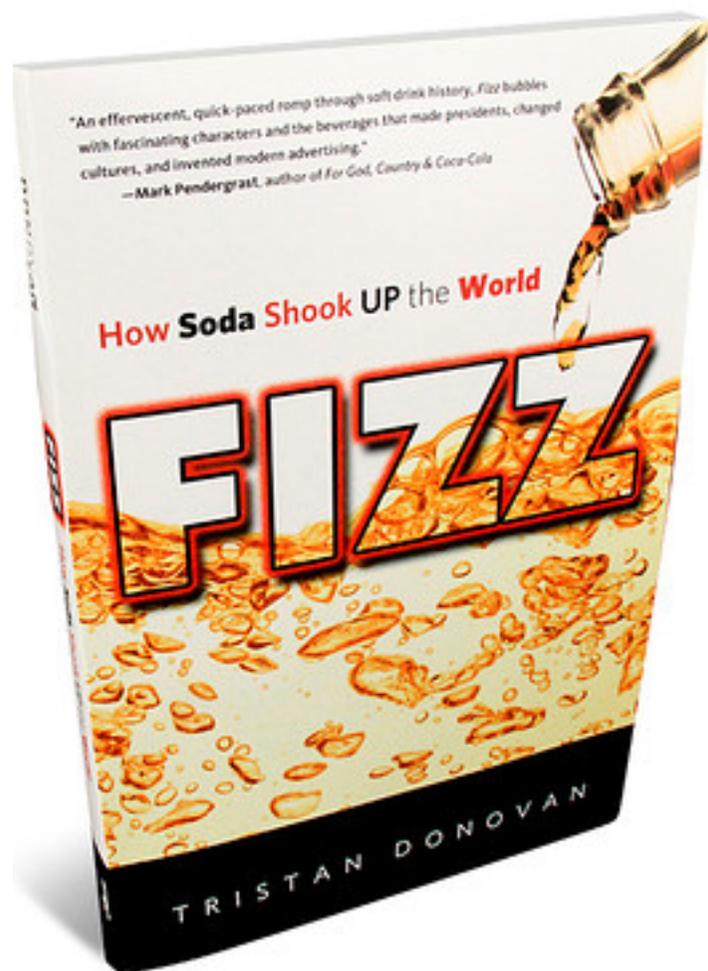
Start with the most inexpensive ingredient imaginable: water. Add in a penny's worth of sweetener, a few drops of colorants and flavorings, and a couple of grams of gas. Package in a bottle or can, advertise heavily, and sell for many times the cost of production. An easier formula for extraordinary profits is hard to imagine, which may explain why legions of entrepreneurs have tried to make their fortunes peddling fizzy water.

In his new book, "Fizz," journalist Tristan Donovan takes us on a fast-paced ride through the history of the soft-drink industry. Along the way, we encounter an astonishing number of important personalities who, for one reason or another, were intimately involved in the business of turning water and carbon dioxide into bubbly beverages. Many of them lost their shirts in the process. The author tracks the story of fizz from Hannibal, who apparently watered his elephants at the springs from which Perrier is drawn, to today's world of Big Gulps and two-liter bottles.

Among the earliest soft-drink entrepreneurs was Joseph Priestly (1733-1804), the English polymath best known for his early experiments with electricity. Priestly believed that mineral water was conducive to good health, and he was obsessed with finding a way to make it artificially. In 1772, he presented a paper titled "Directions for Impregnating Water With Fixed Air" to the Royal Society, showing how water, chalk and sulfuric acid could be shaken together in an apparatus made of glass, a pig's bladder, leather pipe, cork and a quill to make fizzy water. The hope that it could prevent scurvy proved unfounded, but British apothecaries were soon selling fizzy water as a cure for kidney disease and ulcers, among other ailments.

Priestly's apparatus was soon improved by a German-born jeweler named Jean Jacob Schweppe (1740-1821). By the late 1780s, Schweppe, who lived in Switzerland, was carbonating water drawn from Lake Geneva and exporting it in stoneware bottles. He moved to London and began dispensing bubbly water from a machine outfitted with fake cranks and wheels, the better to protect his design. Schweppe got rich and sold out, but as mineral water became a fad in the 1820s, "Schweppes" would become one of the

first important brands.



Fizz: How Soda Shook Up the World

By Tristan Donovan

(Chicago Review Press, 282 pages, \$17.95)

cocaine when it did not.

The development of bottling technology around 1900 radically reshaped the business. From producing small quantities of syrup to be mixed at a soda fountain, soft-drink makers became packaged-goods companies, selling bottled products at retail. The downside was the high cost of building bottling plants. The companies eventually found the formula for growth by signing up franchised bottlers, a strategy that let them to expand with other people's capital. Through wars, mergers and marketing inspirations, the industry matured into an oligopoly in which Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and the Dr Pepper Snapple Group play dominant roles.

"Fizz" is a book for general readers with a fondness for soda, not a detailed business history. Although Mr. Donovan has done considerable research, business readers may find that he spends a bit too much space on soft-drink genealogy and not enough exploring the key strategic moves that enabled the giants to thrive. Some key incidents he recounts—the 1940 decision by Pepsi Chairman Walter S. Mack II to hire African-American sales representatives; the disastrous change in the formula of Coca-Cola in 1985—have been amply chronicled elsewhere. Other important events, such as the chaotic 1981 ouster of Coca-Cola CEO J. Paul Austin, who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease, aren't discussed here at all.

Across the ocean, Benjamin Rush (1745-1813), a prominent Philadelphia physician and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was enthusiastic about the virtues of mineral water. So was Benjamin Silliman (1779-1864), one of the founders of American science. Silliman supplemented his meager income as Yale's first chemistry professor by selling fizzy water by the glass, promoting it as healthful. Silliman's venture at a New Haven pharmacy was a success, but when he tried to export the concept to New York, he ran up against competitors who presented their soda fountains as pleasure palaces. Silliman, Mr. Donovan writes, "misjudged the desires of his customers. They might have wanted the curative fizz but they were just as, if not more, keen on having somewhere to go that was fun and inviting."

For many years, the cheapest way to make water bubbly was to stir in bicarbonate of soda. In the middle of the 19th century, pouring sulfuric acid over marble became the preferred technique for making carbon dioxide, but the name "soda" stuck. Flavored sodas soon hit the market, gaining popularity as an aggressive temperance movement praised the virtues of nonalcoholic beverages. But not all flavored sodas were deemed virtuous: Coca-Cola, first marketed in 1886, spent more than two decades fighting first claims that it contained cocaine, an illicit substance, and then claims that its name misled consumers into believing it contained

Americans now seem to be turning away from fizz. Per capita consumption of soft drinks is down about 16% since it peaked in 1998. According to Beverage Marketing Corp., which makes money by knowing such things, a sour economy left Americans spending less on nonalcoholic liquid refreshment in 2012 than they did in 2007.

As Mr. Donovan notes, the soft-drink giants face plenty of challenges, from government anti-obesity campaigns to the emergence of new producers. "By the time the industry agreed to start removing fizzy drinks from schools, soda was clearly in trouble," Mr. Donovan writes. In truth, though, neither New York Mayor [Michael Bloomberg](#) nor Red Bull represents an existential threat. The soda companies spin off enormous amounts of cash; if consumers want energy drinks or all-natural sodas rather than traditional Coke and Pepsi, the manufacturers can deliver. And if more schools bar the sale of sugary drinks or more mayors ban supersize sodas—so what? Plain water, attractively packaged, offers a heck of a margin.

Mr. Levinson's most recent book is "The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America."

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