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Bottling up demand: bringing back a simpler taste from a simpler time

Having started production on vintage equipment in May, a Blaine man offers 10 flavors of classic soda pop sold in 1950s-style heavy glass bottles across the Twin Cities.

By [Karen Zamora](#) Star Tribune

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Photos by Richard Tsong-Taatarii • rtsong-taatarii@startribune.com In a warehouse in Forest Lake, Jesse Hopkins launched Whistler Classic Soda, a start-up that is producing vintage inspired gourmet sodas.

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Inside a small warehouse nestled between a Forest Lake boat repair shop and Interstate 35E, Jesse Hopkins pushes an array of buttons on a 1950s mint-green hunk of metal. The restored machine buzzes and hums as lime liquid flows from tubes into glass bottles and then overflows onto the floor.

“It’s always a little finicky,” said Hopkins, of Blaine, as he pats the 10,000-pound machine. But that’s part of its charm.

The liquid is from Hopkins’ start-up beverage business, [Whistler Classic Soda](#). The machine is the key to making the low carbonated, all-natural vintage pop. Made from simple recipes, Whistler soda has

been bubbling since May, but the flavors and concept are decades old. Hopkins' line of classic soda pop is filling something not commonly found these days: returnable glass bottles.

“As a kid, I loved it when my mom brought home an eight pack of bottles, always in returnable bottles,” he said. “And when that vanished, I missed it.”

Hopkins' team, made up of family and friends, produces a line of 10 vintage-inspired flavors, including root beer, cream soda, fruit punch, lime and the best seller — black cherry.

Hopkins, who is an assistant principal at a St. Paul Park middle school, didn't set out to be a soda maker. He had created a home brewery as a hobby and thought about turning it into a business, but financially it was out of his reach. But when he brewed the beer, he also made soda for his kids and friends who don't drink alcohol. His homemade pop was a hit, and his original business idea changed to making soda.



In a warehouse in Forest Lake, Jesse Hopkins, of Blaine, launched Whistler Classic Soda, a start-up beverage company that is producing a line of vintage inspired gourmet sodas bottled in returnable glass bottles.

Many months were spent researching the craft of making vintage soda. Hopkins reached out to the nearest soda-making company, Flavor 8 Bottling in New London, Wis., and for two years spent weekends learning from founder and owner Dave Talo.

When it came time for Talo to upgrade his mint green bottling machine, Hopkins jumped at the chance to buy it and start Whistler.

Talo, who opened Flavor 8 in 2011, closed it last month. The market is there, he said, but he ran into mechanical issues. He said he had a big customer base and sold about 600 cases a week.

“If the model is right, the taste is right, then it'll work,” said Talo, who is now a chief mixer at Twigs Beverage in Shawano, Wis.

He also says he was impressed with Hopkins' character and enthusiasm, and likes his chances.

“Jesse is intelligent,” Talo said. “The returnable bottle business has nothing but growth. Soda is a fun product and Jesse's got what it takes.”

Incorporating the past

Hopkins has fond memories from his youth of picking different flavors of pop made with real sugar. He paid a 10-cent deposit per bottle, then would return the empties and pick out a new batch to bring home.

Now, he wants his new business to encompass that experience, in everything from the ingredients to the name.

“It’s really hard to be angry when you’re whistling,” he said. “So, Whistler Classic Soda.”

He got some recipes from old newspapers, others on the web, some from experimentation. But they were simple: made with pure cane sugar, premium flavors, filtered water, low carbonation and bottled in heavy, reusable glass.

“The soda we drank as kids was always in a returnable glass bottle,” he said. “I definitely miss that.”

Hopkins’ \$150,000 operation is slowly becoming a success. The glass bottles are making their rounds throughout the Twin Cities. Currently, cases of Whistler Classic Soda are going to about 20 different retailers, including food trucks, restaurants and small grocers. Hopkins said he’s hoping to add an additional 17 accounts to the list.

Whistler is among the 50 glass bottled soda brands at Tim and Tom’s Speedy Market in St. Paul.

Jake Spreigl, manager at Tim and Tom’s, said the market started a craft soda shelf in April. Several months ago, it added Whistler to the shelf.

“It’s fun to have a local soda at the store,” Spreigl said.

On Saturdays, the public can also visit the Whistler warehouse to pick up bottles directly. There, the soda pop is sold in eight-packs for \$5 (plus tax) plus a one-time \$4 deposit charge for the eight returnable bottles. They are also sold by the case for \$15 and a one-time \$12 deposit.

“It’s nostalgic bringing returnable bottles home,” Hopkins said. “If I was 70 and never did this, it would tear me up.”

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