

# If all else fails, make it yourself

One man's quest for root beer led to a tasty connection between two British businesses, says **Simon Brooke**

When Ken Graham moved from the US to London in the summer of 2012, he resigned himself to saying goodbye to the root beer of his homeland. While the UK had everything else to offer him and his wife – particularly the job offer for Mrs Graham that inspired the move – the Colorado native couldn't find a remotely authentic version of his favourite drink among the varieties that he found on sale in Britain.

What's more, following a crackdown by the Food Standards Agency on certain additives, many root beers brewed in the US could not be imported into this country. Mr Graham didn't start his UK job at a London bank for some time, and was often at home, bored and thirsty.

"I was going stir crazy, so I went to work in sales for a friend's microbrewery," he says, "just to help out and relieve the boredom." He soon started making his own root beer, following a recipe learned from his father.

Soon enough, Mr Graham's hobby became something of a passion and eventually he decided to forgo his job with the bank and to become a full-time root beer and cream soda manufacturer, setting up his own company, Soda Folk.

In a little over two years, he raised £100,000 from family and friends as well as equity from crowdfunding site Crowdfunder. He launched the company in the summer and it is already on track for a turnover of £200,000, with the drink produced in a



rented space in Herefordshire.

Soda Folk's Root Beer combines carbonated water and pure cane sugar with wintergreen – a herb tasting similar to dandelion and burdock – aged vanilla and maple syrup. The brand describes the taste as "uncommonly good".

It's also an uncommonly good accompaniment to a hamburger. One day, while pitching his friend's beer to the buying team at the Byron restaurant chain, Mr Graham noticed a root beer on the menu. It was produced by a big supplier, but "I knew I could do better", he says. He sent some samples in, and the chain's owners were soon hooked.

"We heard about Ken's love of root beer when he was working in the craft brewery," says Tom Byng, founder of Byron. "When we found out that Ken had a dream of making his own craft sodas here in London, we told him that it would be something we'd be very

interested in – and that spurred him on."

Knowing that there would be a potential market for a branded soda convinced Mr Graham to move Soda Folk into full production. "They said that I was on the right track," he says. "That was all I needed to hear."

Byron is an ambitious brand, with 37 London restaurants and more springing up around the country. Mr Graham knew that, if he could connect his brand to this success, it would be a fast track to growth.

Mr Byng says: "Our focus on individuality – seen most clearly in the fact that all our restaurants are completely individually designed – means that we're always looking to support craft and creativity wherever we can."

"Ken's craft sodas are the perfect match for our proper hamburgers – they represent classic American flavours, made with real, simple ingredients, and lots of care and attention to detail."

In order to partner the products properly, some refinements were required, however. Mr Graham met

with Mr Byng and his team for tastings of prototype root beers to pair with items from the menu, adjusting the flavours for a UK audience unfamiliar with root beer, and with palates less sweet than their US counterparts.

"Ken would share samples with our drinks buyer while developing the recipe. We would taste batches as he shipped them to us and everyone who was around would get involved, from chefs to restaurant managers," says Mr Byng.

Face-to-face, via email and phone, Soda Folk was revised and refined as the two parties got it ready to launch on Byron's menus. The recycled bottles used by Mr Graham – the same used at his friend's microbrewery – were even replaced by cans, to better fit the Byron brand. "Cans protect against sunlight and oxygen better than bottles, which keeps drinks fresher and tastier," explains Mr Byng. "They're also better for the environment."

Mr Graham has taken that advice on board from the team at Byron, and he's keen to stress just how important

such helpful insights and encouragements have been throughout the businesses' collaboration. "There was such a good personal chemistry between the Byron team and me," he says. "We got on very well and they were so encouraging and reassuring."

Next in the pipeline for Byron and Soda Folk is a new range of alcoholic products: "hard sodas".

"We're testing the waters with consumers and we'll probably have a launch event after Christmas," says Mr Graham. "We're already working together, doing tastings and sharing ideas to make sure we get this new product just right."

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**Classic American flavours** Soda Folk's range includes a root beer to complement burgers

“Ken had a dream of making his own craft sodas here in London

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