

A thirst for old-time flavour

PEI's J.J. Stewart Soda Company makes a root beer that's a blast from the sweet, sweet past

by Jack MacAndrew

MY WIFE, Barbara, has often recalled childhood visits with her mother to Bessie Snair of Mahone Bay, NS—visits made particularly memorable by the homemade root beer concocted by Bessie, and stored in her root cellar.

This was a dark and pungent beverage, to be sipped and savoured slowly (much in the manner of those who enjoy a well-aged dram of Scotch malt whiskey). It was a beverage whose mysterious flavour coated the taste buds, lasting like a pleasant memory, long after the liquid was consumed.

So it seemed a natural thing to do, when I brought home a bottle of J.J. Stewart Root Beer (like Bessie's version—"brewed in small batches"), to ask her to taste-test this modern configuration of the traditional soft drink.

I poured a portion into a glass, and waited while Barbara took a tentative sip.

She closed her eyes and said: "Bessie Snair."



Soda-makers Thom and Heather MacMillan strike a pose that pays homage to Heather's grandfather, a former gold prospector who ran a general store in PEI in the early 1900s. Right: The root beer that's struck a chord with Islanders.





J.J. Stewart, shown far left, didn't strike it rich in the gold fields of Colorado, but he was able to buy the general store at left, upon his return. Opposite: The MacMillans brew, label and bottle every root beer themselves.

"I never thought I'd see the day when an Islander would drive 70 miles just to get a bottle of root beer"

Clearly, not only did that sip satisfy her palate, it immediately evoked memories of a childhood long past; warm and pleasant evocations of a time when the world seemed a more simple and tranquil place to be a child.

Her reaction confirmed for me that Thom MacMillan and his wife, Heather, are onto something with their revival of the sort of root beer sold by Heather's grandfather, John James Stewart—better known by the locals who stopped by his general store in Wood Islands, PEI, as "Utah Jack."

The legend of Utah Jack

J.J. Stewart was the second son in a family of 10 children, born to descendants of settlers from the Isle of Skye, who arrived on Prince Edward Island in 1803 to begin farming the fertile soil.

It was the custom, in those times, that the first born son inherited the family farm, and took on responsibility for the care of elderly parents, which meant that later sons were pretty much left to seek out their own prospects.

So J.J. looked southward and westward to the gold fields of Colorado, where a motherlode had been discovered, in an area known as

Cripple Creek in 1891.

He spent some time in Utah, where he acquired a wife named America Ford, a redoubtable woman who, on their way to the gold diggings, rode a donkey over Pike's Peak while pregnant. But some time later, J.J. fell ill, and decided to return to PEI.

He left America Ford and one son behind, after she refused to accompany him to "that godforsaken place so far from home." The couple mutually arranged a divorce by mail, and J.J. later married a local girl named Isabella MacPhee—who would become Heather MacMillan's grandmother.

The family history does not record the degree of success J.J. enjoyed in the gold fields, but it was clearly enough to finance the purchase of a general store in Wood Islands, which he acquired some time after his return in 1893; he operated it until three years before his death, in 1932.

No ordinary soft drink

Heather grew up and married Thom MacMillan, whose Scottish ancestors arrived on PEI in 1806, joining her husband in the operation of their tourism businesses. For 34 years, they ran a motel in Wood Islands, and still

operate "Ripley's Believe It Or Not!" in Cavendish, as well as several other attractions. All the while, Thom had a yearning for old-fashioned root beer, which remained a personal quest that was only occasionally satisfied.

Root beer, it must be said, is not your ordinary soft drink, and root beer connoisseurs are a dedicated lot. Not for them are the watery and usually over-carbonated brews foisted upon an unsuspecting public by commercial companies. No sir. Connoisseurs demand the care and regard for taste and flavour that only close attention can ensure.

No one is exactly sure who invented the drink, let alone where or when.

In fact, there is no single recipe for the making of the brew, though the main ingredients—cane sugar, water, carbonation—are common. What is uncommon is the key element—flavouring.

I asked Thom MacMillan what spices he used to flavour his batches.

"I won't tell you," he responded, with a firmness of tone that strongly suggested any further prying would be fruitless. "I'll just say it's an old-fashioned flavour."

In any case, it took a half dozen



attempts before Thom and Heather were satisfied that they had a formula Utah Jack would have been proud to sell in his store—root beer cooked slowly and carbonated lightly, with no preservatives, so the full flavour comes through.

What remained was a larger question—would the “old-fashioned flavour” of their creation sit well on the palates of contemporary customers?

Keeping up with demand

During their first year, in 2009, they cooked, bottled, labeled and sold around 3,000 bottles of J.J. Stewart Root Beer on Prince Edward Island. Customers clamoured for more.

“I never thought I’d see the day when an Islander would drive 70 miles just to get a bottle of root beer,” Thom says, slowly shaking his head in

wonderment.

The MacMillans will exceed their expectations for sales this year—still making, bottling, and labeling their product themselves, and delivering primarily to resident PEI customers. They are planning an expansion into Internet sales, but their long experience as entrepreneurs has taught them caution.

“Some people told us we were crazy to get into this at our age,” Thom says with a laugh.

“We are taking it slowly. As it is, we have difficulty keeping up with demand. We know that some people from away are buying up cases to take home with them, and we can fill orders from off-island if people want to pay the shipping costs.”

“For us, this is fun,” says Heather. “The interesting thing is that we

thought our market would lean toward older people. Instead, we’re finding that young people like our root beer just as much as older folks.”

While their old-fashioned root beer is garnering attention, it’s not their only interest in the burgeoning market for artisan food products.

Two years ago, they bought a company called Embers from the retiring owners, which included recipes for a variety of award-winning sauces and spreads—among them, Orange Chocolate Sauce, Blueberry Cream Spread, Horseradish Jelly and a Cranberry and Wild Blueberry Sauce infused with Grand Marnier.

They now pay homage to the man who inspired it all by marketing all their craft food products under the brand name “J.J. Stewart Foods.”

Utah Jack would be proud.