

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF DETROIT

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VERNOR'S GINGER ALE

One of the nation's oldest soft drinks, Vernor's Ginger Ale was first served to the public in 1866. The drink was created by Detroitier [James Vernor](#), a well-respected pharmacist with a reputation for meticulous care with his prescriptions.

James Venor began his career as an errand boy at Higby & Stearns Drug Store in 1858, later becoming a junior clerk. Experimenting with a medicinal tonic of vanilla and spices, adding ginger to calm the stomach, he left the mixture in an oak barrel when he went to serve in the Civil War in 1862. The popular story is that when Vernor returned from the war, he opened the barrel and was surprised by its delicious contents. The beverage had a zesty, sweet, gingery flavor that was accentuated by the wood's aging process. However another claim, backed by a family member, is that Vernor did not create the formula for his drink until after the Civil War.

He opened his own pharmacy in 1866 and for several years, Vernor's soda fountain was the only place where one could purchase the beverage. As demand grew Vernor began to sell his product to other soda fountains, requiring them to install special equipment in order to properly serve the soda. Vernor was vigilant about each ingredient, including the carbonated water, which he also sold, with which the extract was mixed, reportedly treating the soda with the same consistency and attention that he paid to his prescriptions. As its fame grew, Vernor's became available throughout the Midwest. A plant was soon opened in Detroit so that Vernor's could be mass produced locally. The factory continually expanded with the company's increasing success. The company's last plant was at 4501 Woodward Avenue in what is now Midtown, and featured a block long glass front that revealed the bottling process.

James Vernor II became president of the company in 1896, and the company remained in family hands until 1966. James Vernor was 84 when he passed away in 1927. His family joked that he did not retire until just hours before his death.

Vernor's and the City of Detroit grew together. A massive sign that illuminated the company logo was located along the Detroit River where ferries took passengers to Windsor, [Bob-lo](#), and [Belle Isle](#). In the 1940s, a shop opened along the river that allowed visitors to watch soda production as they enjoyed their drinks.

A highly carbonated beverage, Vernor's is often used to cure stomachaches or mixed with lemon juice and served hot to nurse a sore throat or cough. A popular dessert beverage, the Boston Cooler, pairing vanilla ice cream with Vernor's soda, took its name from the generic term used in the early 20th century for any drink mixing ice cream and soda, not from [Boston Boulevard](#). The Vernor's Company copyrighted the Boston Cooler name in 1967 when it was used for their Vernor's flavored ice cream bar. The Detroit confectionary chain [Sanders](#) also made a Vernor's-flavored ice cream at one time.

Sometime at the end of the 1950s, the name lost its apostrophe and became simply Vernors. The Vernor family sold the company to an investment group in 1966; it was later owned by American Consumer Products, United Brands and then A&W Beverages. Purchased by Cadbury-Schweppes in 1993, today Vernors is part of Dr. Pepper Snapple, one of the nation's largest beverage producers.