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Real Ginger Beer

The authentic stuff is beer, not soda, and it's delicious, and it's made in Pawtucket by a goat farmer.

BY FRANCINE MAROUKIAN

1 THE CHALLENGE

These guys set out to make alcoholic (traditional) ginger beer without using grain, which they thought would overpower the ginger and make the drink too heavy.

2 WHY THIS IS INTERESTING

Alcoholic ginger beer, historically a farmhouse and tavern specialty, remains popular in the U.K., but Farmer Willie's Craft Ginger Beer is one of the first American versions. It won the gold medal (gluten-free) at the Great International Beer Festival, and Bill Murray once called it the best ginger beer ever. At first taste, lovers of supermarket "ginger beer" might find themselves on the weird side of surprise. That's because Willie's is brewed ginger beer at 4.5 percent ABV (classified as "craft ginger beer"), while supermarket versions are just pepped-up ginger ale: carbonated water, corn syrup, and ginger flavoring with no alcohol.

3 HOW THE COMPANY STARTED

Like any good adventure story, **Farmer Willie's** started with friends on a mission: **Willie Fenichel** (that's him in the middle), Cape Cod goat farmer, who developed the foundational recipe; **Nico Enriquez** (left), summer regular in the Fenichel family kitchen; and **Max Easton** (right), Nico's best friend at Brown University, both class of '16. Sophomore year, Nico and Max worked in a startup incubator at Brown, where they learned about business, marketing, and the trickier challenge of scaling Willie's five-gallon-batch home brew to consistent 1,000-gallon batches.

4 THE SCIENCE PART

Yeast digests sugar to convert into alcohol; adding grains (normally a main ingredient in beer) gives the yeast a more balanced diet and produces a tastier beverage. But the Willie's guys don't use grain—too heavy-tasting. Fermenting simple sugars in ginger, lemon juice, and sugarcane on a large scale without the benefit of grains required experimentation—it took two years and 100 test batches before they developed the proprietary formula that's the heart of the business. Slowing the fermentation time by using a colder temperature (65 F versus the normal 72 to 80) also created a better environment for the yeast to convert glucose into the ethyl alcohol and carbon dioxide that gives Willie's its alcohol content and carbonation.

"Yeast live by the same principles as humans: Give them a balanced diet and a healthy environment to grow and they will propagate in a healthy manner," says Nico. The unpredictability of the natural champagne yeast they use is also its magic: Each batch of Willie's is alive and slightly different. "Using natural yeast produces a drink that slowly changes and ages like wine, hitting peaks at different points. And that's beautiful."



📍 WHERE TO FIND IT AND WHAT TO DO WITH IT

Willie's is a craft product with limited distribution, available in New England and for shipping online. Mix 1 oz dark rum and ½ oz orange liqueur (like Grand Marnier) over ice in a tall glass, top with Farmer Willie's and a lemon slice.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HENRY HUNG