

Lifestyle

Odd Jobs: Beverage Flavor Scientist

By Eric Spitznagel

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David Dafoe doesn't hesitate when asked to name the grossest soda flavor he's ever created. "That would be fish taco," he says. The recipe was commissioned by Jones Soda Co., a novelty beverage distributor in Seattle. It was an experiment that proved more rewarding for the flavor scientists in Dafoe's laboratory than paying beverage consumers with taste buds. (It has since been discontinued.) "It was a fun challenge," Dafoe says. "We could get dead on with these things. But it tasted horrible."



The second grossest flavor in his portfolio is also one of his favorites. "We did a Big Ass Canned Ham Soda for the David Letterman show," he says with a chuckle. "It was terrible, but it tasted exactly like a ham. You'd drink it and think, 'Yep, that's ham, all right.'"

Not every flavor created by Dafoe and his team of "beverage architects" (his words) is quite so cringe-worthy. Since 1992, Flavorman—a flavor development company in Louisville he founded and continues to run as chief executive and president—has engineered flavor formulas for Chiquita, Sunsweet Growers, Ocean Spray, and Kellogg, among other clients. Business has been up since 2010, Dafoe says, which he credits in part to his company's name change. "We were originally called Pro-Liquitech International," he says. "When the economy went south, we did some research to find out we might be losing customers. We realized that 87 percent or 88 percent of people who tried to Google 'Pro-Liquitech' never found us, because they spelled it wrong." He opted instead for the company name Flavorman, which was already his personal nickname among longtime clients. "It just flowed better," he says. "It sounds like a super-hero. Pro-Liquitech sounds like a chemical company."

A typical day at the office for Dafoe involves checking in with his team of flavor scientists and sampling whatever mixtures they're working on. "I'm like an internal consultant," he says. "I'll be up and down the line in the lab, saying 'add this' or 'subtract this.'" Flavorman is currently developing top-secret alcohol prototypes for an "internationally renowned" vodka company that Dafoe is contractually restricted from discussing—their new flavors include "whipped cream, lemon chiffon cake flavor, and devil's food cake"—and all the research, he says, usually happens in the mornings. "Even though the rule is to spit it out, if you're working on something for three, four hours, you're going to ingest some of it," he admits. "Maybe a lot of it." If he's going to have a lab filled with drunk scientists, he says, he'd rather they be drunk in the morning. "We don't want anybody driving home with a belly full of vodka," he says. "I'd rather give them the afternoon to sober up."

Day drinking isn't the most adventurous thing that happens at Flavorman. They've developed Thanksgiving-themed sodas, with such flavors as turkey and gravy, green bean casserole, corn on the cob, and pecan pie. They created a recipe for Antimatter Energy Drink (advertised as "The World's First Space Energy Drink"), and for the sake of truth in advertising, the ingredients were launched into space in 2007. (Dafoe's recipe shared a flight with the remains of James Doohan, the actor who played Scotty on Star Trek.)

But the strangest part of his job—the stories he says would shock anyone who doesn't work in the beverage industry—are the ingredients he uses in recipes every day. "People get scared when I mention things like benzaldehyde," Dafoe says. "It sounds like some weird chemical. I say that word, and people scrunch their eyebrows." But benzaldehyde is actually just an extract from peach and apricot pits—"It's what makes a cherry taste like a cherry, he says"—which admittedly has traces of cyanide, but not in large enough quantities to kill anybody.

The really scary stuff, which consumers rarely hear about, are ingredients such as castoreum, an extract from the anal glands of beavers. "We've used that in raspberry flavors for a long, long time," he says. "We just don't tell everybody about it." Similarly, many juice companies use a coloring agent called carmine, which is a nice word for ground-up beetle wings. "It's used to create a red or pink or purple color," he says. "But some people get mortified by the idea of eating bugs. So we try not to mention it."

It's ironic, he says, especially in a food culture that put a high premium on organic ingredients. "If people want natural," Dafoe says, "you can't get more natural than beetle wings and beaver anus."