

Inside the Last Old-School Seltzer Shop in New York



By [Corey Kilgannon](#) May 13, 2023

Brooklyn Seltzer Boys has a century-old carbonator and a museum with a spritzing station. Beat that, LaCroix.

A century ago, before it was called sparkling water or club soda, and before it was sold as LaCroix and Spindrift, it was called seltzer. No plastic bottles or aluminum cans magically appeared on grocery shelves. Instead, factories across New York City pumped fizzy water into heavy siphon bottles that were distributed by deliverymen.

Nearly all those seltzer men are gone now; one seltzer works remains.

In an industrial space in the Cypress Hills section of Brooklyn, the [Brooklyn Seltzer Boys](#) factory is known among industry insiders, certain foodies and seltzer fans, but that's about it. Its owner, Alex Gomberg, wants to change that.

Originally called Gomberg Seltzer Works, the business was started in 1953 in Canarsie, Brooklyn, by Moe Gomberg, Mr. Gomberg's great-grandfather. After nearly closing for good during the pandemic, Brooklyn Seltzer moved and (somewhat) modernized its factory, introducing a visitable space called the Brooklyn Seltzer Museum.

"We want to introduce the next generation to seltzer," Mr. Gomberg said.

The museum, which is appointment-only, features vintage bottles from seltzer companies all over the country and exhibitions on how the bubbly elixir is made, as well as its historical and cultural role.



The Brooklyn Seltzer Boys offers visitors the opportunity to have a tour and learn the process of seltzer making and bottling. "We want to introduce the next generation to seltzer," Alex Gomberg said.



Seltzer dates back 2,500 years, to ancient Greece, and 150 years in New York.



Next to the exhibitions, delivery workers drop off empty bottles and pick up freshly filled ones.

Mr. Gomberg created the museum along with Barry Joseph, a seltzer historian — perhaps *the* seltzer historian — who also teaches digital learning and engagement for museums at New York University. Mr. Joseph arranged for a dozen graduate students from N.Y.U. and Columbia University, most of whom were from China and had never heard of seltzer,

to help create the exhibitions as part of their studies.

“They caught on quick,” Mr. Joseph said. “They got it.”

Earlier this month at the Cypress Hills space, Mr. Joseph walked along a wall showing a 2,500-year-old seltzer history timeline that dated to ancient Greece. He inspected illustrations of how seltzer is made and bottled, as well as digital 3-D models of the machines.

New York seltzer, which has become a culinary staple in the city like knishes and Dr. Brown’s Cel-Ray soda, has its own history, Mr. Joseph said.

Many Eastern European Jews who enjoyed seltzer overseas began making, delivering and selling it in the early 1900s, largely on the Lower East Side. They also sold it from soda fountains — either straight up, as a citrus concoction known as a lime rickey, or with milk and chocolate syrup known as an egg cream.

While many Americans switched to soda after World War II, many Jews in the city stuck with seltzer, Mr. Joseph said.

At Brooklyn Seltzer Boys, the museum and the factory can merge into one educational experience. Next to the exhibitions, delivery workers back up their trucks into an area to drop off cases of empty bottles and pick up freshly filled ones. Workers buzz around cleaning, refilling and repairing old nozzle tops.

There is also a spritzing station where visitors can spray seltzer from a bottle, [Three Stooges style](#).

“We wanted to present the rich history of seltzer in New York City within a longstanding mom-and-pop business that still serves as a functioning seltzer works,” Mr. Joseph said.



During the pandemic, Brooklyn Seltzer Boys, the last remaining seltzer works in the city, relocated from Canarsie to Cypress Hills in Brooklyn to avoid shuttering.



Kenny Gomberg, who built most of the factory himself, works as the handyman (being the only one who knows how to repair the old machines).

The pressure in the seltzer is too strong for plastic bottles, so glass bottles are used. Seltzer “should be carbonated enough that it kind of stings the back of your throat,” Mr. Gomberg said.

The seltzer-making area is a Willy Wonka series of units connected by pipes. The star of the show — and the company’s workhorse — is a squat, century-old carbonator that blasts bubbles into triple-filtered tap water at a 43-degree chill. Its 65 pounds per square inch of pressure — too strong for plastic bottles, hence the use of handblown glass bottles made in Europe — breathes bite into an egg cream.

“Good seltzer should hurt — it should be carbonated enough that it kind of stings the back of your throat,” said Mr. Gomberg, who earned a master’s degree in higher education before opting to revive his family’s abandoned delivery service a decade ago. Now his crew has roughly 600 customers (a 10-bottle case costs \$50, including delivery).

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic halted seltzer production and almost persuaded the Gomberg family to shutter the business for good. Instead, they sold the building and bought their current factory in Cypress Hills.

“He found a way to reinvent the business,” said Alex’s father, Kenny Gomberg, who took over from his father, Pacey Gomberg, and brother-in-law Irv Resnick.



Now the elder Gomberg, who built most of the factory himself, is basically his son's handyman; he is virtually the only one who can repair these obsolete machines.

On a recent afternoon, Walter Backerman, 70, was filling his bottles when a ratty old van backed in. His father, Abraham (Big Al) Backerman, was buried with a seltzer bottle. The younger Mr. Backerman, one of the last of the old-school seltzer men, hobbles from years of lugging cases up and down stairs. His carrying shoulder is shot. Each case weighs more than 60 pounds full and 45 empty, he said.

But he still wakes before 4 a.m. to serve his customers, partly to keep the seltzer man tradition going.

"These bottles are basically indestructible. I'm just their custodian," he said. "And since the Gombergs decided to reinvest and keep the last seltzer works going, someone else will be able to deliver these bottles after I'm gone."