Cola/Cola Drinks Encyclopedia Article

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Cola/Cola Drinks

Cola drinks are carbonated soft drinks, sodas, that contain some extract of the kola nut in their syrup. Kola nuts are the chestnut-sized and-colored seeds of the African kola tree (*Cola nitida* or *Cola acuminata*). For the softdrink industry, the trees are now grown on plantations throughout the tropics. Historically, kola nuts were valued highly among African societies for their stimulating properties. Kola nuts were cracked into small pieces and chewed for the effect—which increased energy and elevated mood in extremes of heat, hunger, exhaustion, and the like. The European colonists in Africa learned of the effect and some chewed it. In the 1800s, Europeans brought kola nuts to various strenuous endeavors in Africa and in other regions, and they began to increase the areas under cultivation. Kola nuts were soon finely powdered and made into syrups for ease of use—with no loss of effect, it was claimed.

Figure 1 *Kola*

The active ingredient responsible for these stimulatory properties is CAFFEINE, a powerful brain stimulant, which is also present in other plants such as COFFEE, cocoa, TEA, maté, and others. Besides reversing drowsiness and fatigue, a heightened awareness of stimuli and surroundings may occur. Studies have shown that less energy may be expended by the musculature with equal or greater results—in animals as well as humans—but excess use causes TOLERANCE and dependence, often unrealized until deprivation results in severe headaches. Large doses can cause nervous irritation, shaking, sleep disturbances, insomnia, and aggravation of stomach ulcers or high blood pressure.

In the late 1800s, in the United States, cola drinks came onto the market with other carbonated or phosphated (fizzy) drinks. Coca-cola, one of the first and most popular, contained extracts of both the COCA PLANT (cocaine) and the kola nut (caffeine)—but by the early 1900s, with the realization of COCAINE's dangers, this was removed and replaced by additional caffeine. Drinking cola is part of American culture, emulated and enjoyed worldwide, with many brands competing for a huge and growing consumer market. Colas are now available with sugar or artificial sweeteners, with or without caffeine, with or without caramel coloring (clear)—thus indicating that people seem to like the flavor regardless of the specific ingredients or the "effect."

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