

Drink like it's 1985: Coca-Cola revives New Coke for *Stranger Things* 3

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New Coke, *Stranger Things*-style

Stranger Things season 3 is coming to Netflix this July 4, and it's going to be set in the year 1985. As a period detail, the show is going to make reference to New Coke, a disastrous 1980s effort from Coca-Cola to update its namesake drink. For those not old enough to remember, New Coke was met with a massive consumer backlash and a very public climbdown by the company.

But to commemorate New Coke's newfound pop culture relevance, Coca-Cola is going to sell 500,000 cans of New Coke as a *Stranger Things* tie-in. They'll go on sale online on Thursday May 23 at 17:00 EDT. The resurrected drink is also going to be available at World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta on certain days starting June 3. Cans will carry special *Stranger Things* promotional designs, and the company has even remade its original New Coke ad to add a *Stranger Things* twist. The ad will be shown in cinemas.

Marketing tie-ins and product placements happen all the time with major pop culture entities. And normally, a soft drink would do little to deserve such prominent placement in a TV

show. But of course, New Coke is no ordinary soft drink; it was a major news story for the three months or so that it was on the market at the time.

Coca-Cola introduced New Coke with great fanfare in 1985. Consumers in blind taste tests showed a preference for a sweeter, crisper tasting drink—like Pepsi or Diet Coke—to the longer-lasting, bitter-edged sweetness of regular Coca-Cola. While many consumers expressed a brand preference for Coca-Cola, blind testing revealed that they actually preferred the taste of Pepsi. Accordingly, the Coca-Cola company developed a new Coke formula, essentially Diet Coke sweetened with HFCS rather than aspartame. This was brought to market as a replacement for the old Coke, rather than a new variant alongside it. The new formula used the same can design, just with a “New” banner.

While it was successful in taste tests and even successful in limited trials as a fountain drink, its introduction to the wider Coke-buying public proved disastrous. Not so much from a sales perspective—it was accepted and preferred across much of the US—but from a public relations perspective. Coke drinkers in the South regarded the reformulation with hostility, as if a vital part of their identity had been dismissed as inadequate and replaced without their consent. They loudly complained about the new formula and demanded that Coca-Cola revert to the original.

Even in a pre-Internet feedback loop era, when faced with this noisy backlash—along with complaints from bottling companies about the way Coca-Cola priced the new formula’s syrup—the company relented. The original formula was sold side by side with the new formula, with the new one retaining the Coca-Cola name and the old one being “Coca Cola Classic.” In 1992, the new formula was rechristened Coke II, and in 2009 the company finally stopped putting the word “Classic” on old formula bottles.

As a long-time Diet Coke fan (though Vanilla Coke Zero is my true love), this is perhaps one of the most exciting promotional tie-ins I've ever seen. I've never had New Coke, though of course am aware of its reputation, and the prospect of being able to at last try a can has me on tenterhooks. It's been my lifelong ambition to drink a can of New Coke, and I'm thrilled that I might finally get the chance.

Listing image by Netflix/The Coca-Cola Company

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