

Beverages look to spread holiday cheers

'Tis the season for Christmas-themed coffee, wine and beer

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Santa may soon be washing down his cookies with chocolate beer thanks to a creative holiday drink lineup that makes milk seem so last Christmas.

In addition to cacao lagers from two major breweries, the latest seasonal swill includes vanilla-oak ale, peppermint water and gingerbread lattes, all being introduced this month as part of an industry-wide effort to ride Mr. Claus's coattails all the way to the bank.

"It's the time of year when we like to treat ourselves and treat others," says Fred Tibbetts Jr., an international beverage-marketing consultant. "People are usually in the mood to entertain and go out and, therefore, eat and drink a little more lavishly than they might normally, or be more experimental with their [beverage] choices." Tibbetts describes the holiday hullabaloo — at least as it relates to the beer, wine and spirits market — as "on-premise" brand building. Companies create awareness of new drinks in high-profile places such as restaurants and bars in the hope of inspiring eventual "off-premise" sales to carry companies through the slow January selling season.

With a product such as wine, for example, he says every case sold on-premise is thought to generate a sale of



Starbucks is re-introducing its peppermint mocha for Christmas. CNS

five cases off-premise later on.

"In terms of the psychology of it, the holidays are the best time to get people's attention because they're more in a sampling mood," Tibbetts says.

Tim Hortons is hoping Canadians will toast the yuletide season with one of its new "holiday spice" smoothies.

Miller Brewing Co. just announced a limited release of its Frederick Miller Classic Chocolate Lager, a new beer made with real cacao nibs.

Anheuser-Busch's holiday brand,

Michelob Celebrate, is also offering a chocolate lager, along with a vanilla-oak beer that can be consumed from a snifter.

Last weekend, Hint Inc. unveiled peppermint essence water as part of a promotional tie-in with the Disney movie *The Santa Clause 3: The Escape Clause*. And starting this week, Starbucks stores across Canada are re-introducing a Christmas lineup that includes gingerbread lattes, eggnog lattes, and peppermint mochas topped with whipped cream and red sugar sprinkles.

"For competitive reasons, we don't release specific numbers for our product sales," says Hanna Latkowski, marketing manager of Starbucks Canada. "But I can say the success we find with holiday beverages is definitely exceptional."

According to beverage industry expert Bill Barry, the two-month holiday selling season represents about 30 per cent of annual wine sales, 36 per cent of spirit sales, and 20 per cent of beer sales across Canada and the U.S.

Barry, vice-president of hospitality for Trinchero Family Estates — one of the largest North American wine companies — estimates the numbers skyrocket to about 75 per cent for champagne, which he says benefits from New Year's Eve as well as Christmas sales.

As for those Canucks who want to uphold the milk-and-cookies tradition without getting eggnog on their faces, Neilson Dairy has a solution.

The Canadian company just launched The Ultimate French Vanilla Milk, which comes in one-litre bottles perfectly suited to a Santa-sized thirst.