

The rise and fall of Tab - after surviving the sweetener scares, the iconic diet soda gets canned

By [Jeffrey Miller](#)

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Tab, the Coca-Cola company's original diet soda brand, is headed to the soda graveyard, joining retired brands such as [Like](#), [Leed](#) and [Limette](#).



Before there was Diet Coke, there was Tab. Ramin Talaie/Corbis via Getty Images

Coca-Cola has announced that [it is discontinuing Tab after 57 years on the market](#), and fans of the drink will have until the end of December to purchase their last can of nostalgia.

From the beginning, Tab's story has been one of perseverance. The brand survived initial low sales, the artificial sweetener scares of the 1960s and 1970s, lukewarm enthusiasm for the product at the corporate level and intermittent consumer availability to become – for a brief period – the most popular diet soda in America. Then, of course, Diet Coke came along.

While it never regained its lofty status as the top diet soda, loyal Tab fans kept the brand alive.

Meant for diabetics, downed by dieters

While some might think Tab was the first diet soda, that honour actually belongs to [a beverage called No-Cal](#), which was developed by beverage industry pioneer Hyman Kirsch in 1952. Kirsch wanted to create a soda for diabetics and people with cardiovascular problems, [so he used cyclamate](#), which was discovered in 1937 by a graduate student working at a University of Illinois chemistry lab after he licked some of the substance and found that it tasted sweet. About 30 times sweeter than sugar, cyclamate isn't metabolised, making it ideal for people who need to avoid sugar.

But from the start, No-Cal was popular with a different type of consumer: dieters. Actress Kim Novak became [the brand's slim celebrity spokesperson](#). Canada Dry followed soon after with a line of diet sodas called Glamor, [marketing it to women trying to lose weight](#).

Diet soda really took off with [the introduction of Diet-Rite Cola](#) by the Royal Crown Cola company in 1958. Like No-Cal, Diet-Rite initially targeted diabetics and was often placed in the over-the-counter medicine section of grocers. But it soon

became clear that the real market was dieters. By 1960, [Diet-Rite was the fourth-best-selling soft drink in the country](#), trailing only Coca-Cola, Pepsi and 7 Up.



Coca-Cola retires Tab after 57 years

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Soda giants caught flat-footed

Coca-Cola and Pepsi, finding themselves behind the ball, scrambled to come up with their own diet soda offerings.

Coca-Cola's foray into the diet cola market – [dubbed Project Alpha](#) – was an ambitious one. It wanted to come up with a soda that tasted good, had a proper mouthfeel – sugar adds not only sweetness [but also viscosity](#) – and was attractive to women, the presumptive market. It also needed a catchy name.

For the name, Coke executives had one directive: Even though its taste was engineered to mimic Coke's, it couldn't be called Diet Coke. Because most early diet sodas didn't taste that great, [strategists warned](#) against associating their brands with drinks that might taint their tremendous value.

So an early IBM mainframe computer generated [more than 600 candidates](#) with the parameters that the name be three or four letters and not offensive in any foreign language.

Tabb, which was eventually shortened to Tab, eventually won the battle of market testing. Stylized as "TaB," it was introduced to the world [in a series of ads](#) with the tagline "How can just one calorie taste so good?"

For a company that ordinarily has such excellent marketing instincts, Coca-Cola wasn't sure how to fit Tab into its portfolio. Bottlers resisted the product, fearing it would undercut their profitable sugar-based sodas. By the end of its first year, [it had only 10% of the diet soda market](#), an unusual predicament for a brand backed by the No. 1 soda company in the world.

Later in the 1960s, Coca-Cola introduced the grapefruit-flavoured diet soda Fresca, [which was a much bigger hit](#) with consumers and further sidelined Tab.

Emerging from the sweetener scares

Artificial sweeteners were riding high in the 1960s as Americans wanted to enjoy their sweets without paying the caloric price. But danger was lurking in the form of the [Delany Clause](#) in the Food Additives Amendment of 1958, which prohibits food additives that have been found to cause cancer.

In 1969, [the Food and Drug Administration banned the sweetener cyclamate](#) after lab studies indicated that large doses of the sweetener led to bladder cancer in animals. While Tab contained two artificial sweeteners – saccharin and cyclamate – cyclamate was the more important of the two. Saccharin is 300 to 400 times sweeter than sugar, but in high concentrations it gives products a bitter, metallic aftertaste. However, when it's combined with cyclamate, the [bitterness goes away](#).

After the cyclamate ban, Tab was forced to reformulate and ended up deciding to use saccharine as its primary sweetener. Then in a second blow, follow-up research on potential health problems associated with artificial sweeteners focused on saccharin, leading the FDA to require warning labels on products using the sweetener.

Despite these obstacles, Tab [still ended up becoming the bestselling diet cola of the 1970s and 1980s](#). People, it seems, were willing to turn a blind eye to potential health problems as long as they were able to continue to get their diet soda. And Tab, for a brief period, was apparently the favourite of the bunch.

In 1982, Tab was reformulated yet again to include Nutrasweet, [also known as aspartame](#). But Tab drinkers [protested the change to the drink's flavor profile](#), and the company dropped aspartame from the recipe.



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Enter: Diet Coke

After Pepsi entered the diet cola market with Patio, it rebranded the product as “Diet Pepsi” within a year. Consumers embraced the new drink and a string of celebrity endorsers only enhanced its popularity.

This lesson was lost on Coca-Cola, which didn't bring a diet drink using the Coca-Cola name onto the market until 1982, when it introduced Diet Coke.

Contrary to the company's original fears, [Diet Coke was an immediate hit](#). Even though the flavor of the new beverage was not a carbon copy of the sugar-sweetened version, customers took to it. And the main victim of Diet Coke was not the original Coke, but Tab. Over the years, Tab's market share dwindled; by 2019, [its sales made up only about 1% of the Coca-Cola portfolio](#).

Yet the drink managed to retain some passionate devotees, even as rumours of its impending doom circulated on and off

over the years. [A Tab shortage in 2018](#) caused self-described Tab-aholics to stockpile their favourite beverage, and petitions to save the drink were circulated and sent to the company.

They couldn't stop the inevitable. Coca-Cola is trying to cut underperforming brands, and even modern ones like Odwalla juice and regional sodas like Delaware Punch [are poised to fall prey to the cost-cutting guillotine](#). The company says more than half of the 500 brands it currently markets [will disappear in the near future](#).

Tab lovers might have less time than they think to load up; serious Tab fans [have begun snapping up any six-packs](#) that might still be lurking on store shelves.

It won't be long until the only cans left will be in the basements of Tab-aholics.

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