



# This Is Your Brain on a Lime ‘Rita Chiller — How BuzzBallz Won the Hearts, Minds, and Wallets of Americans, \$3.50 at a Time

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I was sitting in the back third of a Spirit Airlines flight from Minneapolis to Las Vegas, listening to the percussive opening and closing of a lavatory door. Instead of a seatback display, I leered into the pallid sheen of the plastic seat in front of me. I tapped my blank phone screen, begging the uncharged device to respond with something to distract. I felt the wrinkles on my brain beginning to dissipate, and that’s when I first laid eyes on the neon carapace of a BuzzBallz Lime ‘Rita Chiller.

It was three rows in front of me, fixed in the spindly fingers of a passenger whose face I never saw. I had to wonder if she was smiling.



Spirit, in a bid to make their flights feel less like traveling in the luggage compartment of a Peter Pan bus, had just begun selling BuzzBallz as [their in-flight beverage option](#). For \$8, you could get one of the Carrollton, Texas, company's ornament-shaped, vacuum-sealed, 15% ABV premixed cocktails delivered right to your seat. They came in the style of a Moscow mule, hard lemonade, or margarita, no mixing or pouring necessary.

I felt the impulse shoot across my lobes, but I didn't acquiesce and order one, a decision I've regretted more and more as BuzzBallz have gone from a low-grade airline refreshment to one of the United States' most popular beverages. Now, BuzzBallz's fluorescent form can be found right by the checkout at gas stations, grocery stores, liquor stores, and convenience stores in 50 states and 24 countries. BuzzBallz now come in more than 70 varieties—including the 187 mL wine-based Chillers line, a spirits-based 200 mL Cocktails extension, and the resealable 1.75 liter Biggies—that have combined for \$400 million in trackable chain retail sales since 2018. Nearly \$150 million of that came in the past year alone.

Despite my reservations, BuzzBallz are now a veritable sensation, and they've been recognized with a spate of industry awards for flavor, packaging, advertising, and innovation. Workaholics star Blake Anderson is now spreading the gospel of the Ballz [all over YouTube](#). Teens in Atlanta are [chugging BuzzBallz while joyriding golf carts](#). Everywhere you look, beautiful-brained people of the world are blissed out on these Poké Balls of booze.

### THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

You've probably seen a discarded BuzzBallz in a city storm drain. The premixed cocktail's bulbous, flat-bottomed form has joined McDonald's fry boxes, Black & Mild wrappers, and those little plastic flossers among the common urban refuse—the discards of a life lived quickly and recklessly.

BuzzBallz resemble single-serve tennis balls, complete with pull-tab pressure seals. The drink inside is most commonly a bright neon color, though some dessert flavors take on a silken opacity. At 15% ABV (30 proof), there's enough alcohol under that Dunlop seal to get you well and truly drunk. The appeal is targeted right to the limbic system. As Liquor.com writer Matt Merkin poetically cracked in [a 2014 article](#), "They are literally ballz that get you buzzed."





Founder Merrilee Kick conceived of the drink from the outside in, focusing on the novelty of a shatterproof but shelf-stable container. [According to Kick](#), she first got the idea in 2009 while gazing into a Swedish crystal snowball and wondering what it'd be like to drink from it. At the time, she was teaching high school in Plano, Texas, while also studying for her MBA at Texas Woman's University. The idea stuck with her, and later, while shopping for tennis balls at Walmart, it struck her that the metal pull-top would be perfect to seal a sippable orb. BuzzBallz became her business school thesis, and soon after, her new career.

Kick's swiftness was motivated partly by the strength of her idea and partly by necessity. Kick says she was likely headed toward a divorce at the time. Her husband, Tim, then the CFO of a communications company, refused to support the idea. So, Kick took \$27,000 from an inheritance and another \$69,000 in a home-equity line of credit and brought it to a bank. They offered her a \$178,000 business loan, and she was off. Within a year, she got a design for the BuzzBallz packaging and found a Chinese manufacturer on Alibaba to make the containers. BuzzBallz launched the same year Kick got her MBA.

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Having devised her signature container, Kick set about concocting the liquids to go inside. She refused to work with a co-packer, claiming they took too much margin. So, she mixed them herself at home. Her first prototype was a screwdriver, made in her garage with vodka and real juice and sealed with a hand crank. Soon, she had six flavors ready to sell. But distributors weren't buying.

This was 2009, seven years before Cutwater Spirits hit the market and long before major brands like High Noon, Jack Daniels, and Bombay Gin normalized ready-to-drink cocktails in America. Distributors didn't know what to do with Kick's product, and because Texas liquor laws required that she work through a wholesaler, she couldn't sell it without them. That's when she formatted the Chillers series. Made with a base of orange wine rather than spirits, Chillers emulated everything a BuzzBallz Cocktail had, but they could be sold in convenience and

grocery stores. Kick toured different convenience stores in her car, hawking BuzzBallz like a vacuum cleaner salesman.



“I started realizing that it was the distributor's job to distribute my product, [but] they weren't going to push for me,” Kick says. “I had to push it myself. So I went door to door. I hit 20 convenience stores a day.”

In 2010, Kick partnered with fellow Plano native Blair Casey of Southern Glazer's Wine & Spirits, who agreed to order five pallets of BuzzBallz to sell locally in Dallas. Then more for San Antonio. Then even more for Houston, Austin, and El Paso. That first year, BuzzBallz sold 20,000 cases. By 2016, the company was making \$20 million a year, with an MSRP of \$3.50 that made BuzzBallz impossible to ignore.

The low price point was made possible by BuzzBallz's full vertical integration. By 2012, Kick had secured her own manufacturing equipment and home-shored the production of BuzzBallz containers to Texas. [A video posted to BuzzBallz's YouTube account in February 2023](#) shows how each BuzzBallz orb goes from an amorphous nipple of plastic to a ready-to-enjoy capsule of budget liquor. It's a captivating, cerebrum-scratching vision, one that's emblematic of BuzzBallz's journey from a teacher's after-school project to an industry megahit. The 500,000-square foot facility is staffed by 650 employees, who work shift-to-shift, manufacturing, labeling, filling, and packing the now-iconic balls.

Kick has still never used a co-packer. All BuzzBallz beverages are formulated in-house. Southern Glazer's is still their largest distributor, but Casey left in 2017 to become vice president of sales & marketing for BuzzBallz. Kick avoided the divorce and in 2018, Tim became the CFO of his wife's billion-dollar daydream.

“All marriages take work, and some don't work out. I wanted mine to work,” Kick says. “We work together every day, but it's like we don't when we are home. We've been together 35 years, and we share many memories and a beautiful family. I'm happy.”

### **JUST SHORT OF ABSURD**

In 2018, Meaghan Garvey found herself entranced. Like me, she was stuck on a Spirit flight with her then-boyfriend, but unlike me, she immediately recognized the splendor of BuzzBallz. Garvey, a music and culture writer for outlets like Pitchfork and Billboard, examined the situation and determined it passed the vibe check. She ordered a round of Tequila 'Ritas and [sent out a tweet to immortalize the moment](#).

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— Meaghan Garvey, Writer and BuzzBallz fan

Garvey admits that, at the time, she and her now-ex were “kind of bums.” She was an early drinker of Four Loko, [back when it still had wormwood in it](#), and she’d been trying to find a new maximalist drink to fill that niche in her life. The mile-high trial went so well that the couple started a conceptual art project, intending to build a giant crucifix out of emptied BuzzBallz. Like Mapplethorpe for people who spend too much time refreshing their Twitter mentions.

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After breaking onto the market, BuzzBallz gained a reputation for being racy and off-color. They came to the market with names like Choc Tease, Cookie Nookie, and Strawberry Rum Job— names Kick claims came out of drunken brainstorming sessions with her sons and her father. Their taglines take glee in obvious genitalia puns. The [2014 launch of their Overdue Blue flavor](#) came with the stinger “WE GOT BLUE BALLZ.” [A 2015 billboard](#) invited interstate drivers to “TASTE OUR BALLZ.”



Kick delighted in the blowback, [telling Forbes](#), “We market to millennials. We don’t want to be taken too seriously.” Though Kick says their drinkers are 65% women over 35, it was Gen Z who would carry BuzzBallz to its highest highs. During the pandemic, BuzzBallz became a sensation on TikTok, where [thousands of videos](#) are posted daily of young adults reviewing new flavors, chugging Biggies, and mixing Chillers with their Starbucks orders.

Despite the overtly adult advertising, watchdog groups like [Ohio’s Drug Free Action Alliance](#) and [Alcohol Justice](#) have accused BuzzBallz of deliberately marketing to underage drinkers. They say the cans look like toys, and the color palette is made to target kids. In 2022, a consumer complaint was levied against BuzzBallz in England. [Though the complaint was eventually thrown out](#), the review board did note that the branding was “close to the line of acceptability.”

From that first moment on that cursed flight, I've always seen BuzzBallz as Garvey has: the spiritual successor to Four Loko. A foolish little fancy that everyone drinks as a joke. Blackout fuel for people who spend too much time online. VICE called BuzzBallz "[something of a meme.](#)" Deadspin derided them as "[sad cocktail grenades.](#)" The internet agreed! But stunts and novelty don't [sell 1 million cases of single-serve cocktails](#) in a single year.



There's a big difference between tweeting the phrase "You're telling me a buzz made this ball?" and looking a relative in the face while you say it. BuzzBallz are for folks who touch grass. For people who don't debate whether or not [the Grimace Shake](#) is a psyop. I have spent way too much time peering into my Google Pixel and not enough interacting with other folks at the gas station, people who overwhelmingly and unironically love BuzzBallz.

The brand has certainly cleaned up its image, renaming the more controversial flavors as chains like Walmart, Albertsons, and Kroger have taken them on. But they still maintain an edge, an uncanny unpredictability. Just when they retire Strawberry Rum Job, they debut a flavor called [Pornstar Martini](#) and run [a testicular cancer awareness ad](#) with two Ballz positioned at the base of a Whipshots container in the unambiguous shape of a dong and yambag.



It's enough to make my membranes melt into soup, so I try to reorient myself by asking Kick a simple question: Was the goal to start something absurd? She rebuts with a perfect, unironic clarity.

“No, it’s not absurd at all,” she says. “It speaks to the consumer the way that they think. We don't want to window dress with things we're not. We just want to be a fun, playful container and fun, playful drinks.”

## CHASING NOON

Kat Normand hosts a nightly karaoke show at the Cat’s Meow on Las Vegas’ Old Strip. The 39-year-old entertainer and event planner has a pure love of BuzzBallz, one that’s endured ever since she found the “so cute” beverage at a 2017 convenience store expo. Now, she’s all-in on BuzzBallz, warming up for many of her performances with two Cranberry Chillers.

“They aren't expensive, but they give you exactly what you need: a buzz,” Normand says. “You’re getting a pretty good buzz for \$8. There’s no question of, ‘Should I get shots?’ ‘Is this good?’ And I've never had a hangover from it, no matter how much I've drank.”

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Kick’s deliberate focus on the grab-and-go market is what propelled BuzzBallz to its position. BuzzBallz are targeted at impulse buyers, displayed in massive cardboard shippers right by the checkout at gas stations and 7-Elevens. Grab one on the way to the party or shove it in your purse for later.



BuzzBallz is now the best-selling ready-to-drink brand in convenience stores in America, and the second best-selling ready-to-drink portfolio overall, only behind High Noon. IRI-tracked sales have doubled every year from 2018-2021 and didn’t reach that same mark last year because sales only grew +54%, adding \$52 million over the prior year for a total of \$148 million. In the first half of 2023, BuzzBallz already hit the \$100 million mark, making more in chain retail than New Belgium’s Voodoo Ranger Imperial IPA, America’s #1 IPA sold in stores. They are outselling beverage giants despite the fact that they’re far less established than powerhouses from wine and spirits conglomerates like E. & J. Gallo and Constellation Brands.



The scrappiness, coupled with the general unseriousness of the brand, has resulted in unbridled loyalty. BuzzBallz is a lifestyle brand, even if that lifestyle seemed unreasonable to irony-poisoned industry commentators like myself. According to Tracy Frisbie, vice president of marketing at BuzzBallz, 54% of people who buy BuzzBallz purchase more within the next 90 days. Comedian and actor Blake Anderson only became a company spokesperson after years of raving about BuzzBallz on his podcast “This Is Important.”

“We’re a mid-sized alcohol manufacturer at this point, and we don’t have a full national accounting, we don’t have full category management,” Frisbie says. “We’re number two behind High Noon, and we actually have half the distribution of High Noon, and we actually outsell them in the stores we’re both in.”

Deontra Braxton, a 27-year-old Megabus driver from Mullica Hills, New Jersey, doesn’t bother with all that. She spends her time online enthusiastically replying to BuzzBallz tweets. She says friends now expect her to bring a purse full of BuzzBallz to any party or pregame.

“Anytime that I’m out, I’m drinking BuzzBallz,” Braxton says. “It has that energy. If I want to have a little quick li’l sip, I know I can count on that compared to having a whole beer bottle container.”





Braxton typifies the average BuzzBallz enthusiast in America. She experiences the drink on an almost instinctual level. Hers is the kind of shameless, wholly indulgent experience that has made BuzzBallz the envy of many countries abroad. Read any one of the brand's Facebook posts, and you'll see Canadians and Australians begging for a national release. After a decade-plus of being Choc Teased, citizens of the United Kingdom [finally got BuzzBallz in their hands](#). BuzzBallz were [just exported to Ireland this year](#), and already the country has become the number one consumer of BuzzBallz, according to Shane Davey, a consultant for Irish distributor Michael Slattery Wines and Spirits who manages Irish sales of the brand.

"I thought this could be a fad, a nice fad. We bring it for a year and a half, two years, make some money, and then it dies," Davey says. "But now we understand there is a place for this, and it's a fun place. I don't think people are going to want to stop having fun, so it has longevity in that respect."

Davey said he had trouble convincing some accounts to take on the product, but sales around the Trinity College Dublin area have transformed their thinking. Now, wholesalers like Musgrave Group are begging him to bring in the Biggies for Christmastime. Davey himself became convinced of the long-term appeal of BuzzBallz after watching his field hockey teammates suck them down with gusto postgame. It was enough to shatter his own suppositions.

"The problem is people think their own perception is reality," Davey says. "It's got nearly a cult status now, and you don't want to overkill that, because cult status works."

## **BUZZ OR BUST**

This past July, six years after that initial Spirit flight, I am back in Las Vegas, running north on the Strip, the sun just beginning to peek over the canyon. There's nobody on the faux-pirate planks outside of Treasure Island save for me and my three coworkers, sweating out last night's margaritas in the morning before our meeting. Just as we're about to make the turn back to the hotel, I see them: humongous Chillers, printed on the shrink-wrapped facade of the Zouk Nightclub.





“BET ON YOUR BALLZ” the two-story ad reads. BuzzBallz had landed, uncritically and unapologetically. Garvey’s art project had seemingly come to life; before me, BuzzBallz towered like a saint over the desert.

Shuffling back down the sidewalks, I have a wordless, internal moment of shame. All these years, I could’ve been throwing back Cran Blasters with a pure and simple mindset like Normand and Braxton, dumping Forbidden Apple over ice in my backyard, or sneaking a sip of a Hazelnut Latte Chiller at Christmas brunch with my brothers.

There is no neuroscience to enjoying BuzzBallz. No cultural justification that’s necessary, no external trend to be had. Regret is futile, but irony is a poison.

Luckily they sell the antidote for \$3.50.

### *Jerard Fagerberg*

Jerard Fagerberg is a freelance beer writer and product manager in Maine. His name is not Jared, but lotsa folks get that wrong.

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