

COLT “45” / MALT LIQUOR / MALT LAGER VARIATIONS

By Randy Karasek

Yep, those boring old Colt cans; the “Colt 45 Malt Liquor” and “Colt Malt Lager”. A very bland design that changed little over the years. However, the National Brewing Company was certainly able to market the brand for many years, and there are numerous minor variations of these beer cans. I know most have already stopped reading (or fallen asleep) if you even made it this far, but for the variation collector there are definitely items of interest. The majority of the variations are in the brewery mandatories or canning company/codes, with the former discussed in this article.

National Bohemian Light zip tab



National Bohemian 12oz Zip Tab

The above is the seam of a National Bohemian Light zip tab, produced around 1963. The format of the brewery mandatory has “THE NATIONAL BREWING COMPANY – DETROIT, MICHIGAN” on one side of the seam, with “OTHER PLANTS MIAMI, FLORIDA – BALTIMORE, MD” on the other. While I only have a Detroit example, I am pretty sure the text looks the same for other cities, just swapping the city of origin.

Wait, isn’t this article supposed to be about Colt variations? Yes it is, but the above example was included as a reference point for National Brewing Company mandatories, since National was producing both the above National Bohemian zip and Colt 45 brands concurrently, and this helps compare/contrast the chronology of the mandatories.

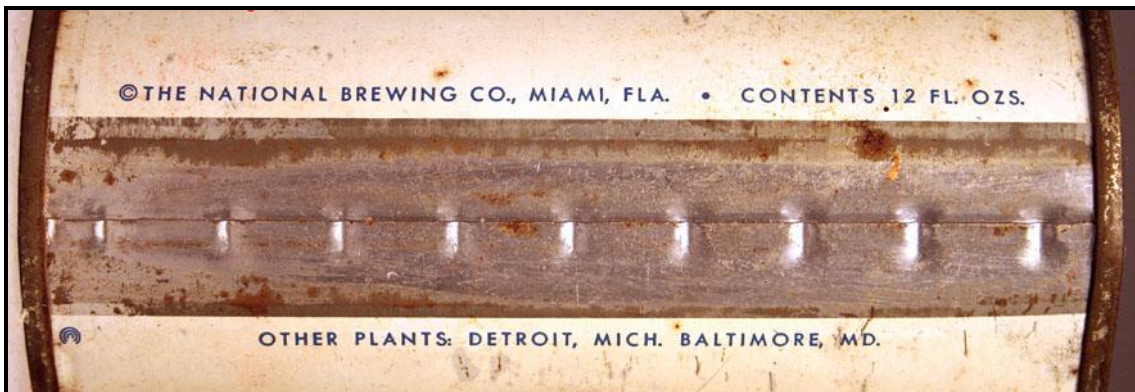
Colt 45 Malt Liquor – Flat Tops



Colt 45 16oz Flat Top

Sometime in the early 1960's (1963?) National began producing Colt 45 Malt Liquor, and this brand continued for many years, even carried into the 1980's by the G. Heileman Brewing Company. While the vast majority of Colt 45 Malt Liquor beer cans are either standard tab top or earlier zip top, at least for a short time period some flat tops were produced, at least from the Miami, Florida brewery. The above picture is of a dumper 16oz flat top, and has mandatory text similar to the National Bohemian Light zip: "THE NATIONAL BREWING CO., MIAMI, FLA." and "OTHER PLANTS: DETROIT, MICH. BALTIMORE, MD.", with only minor change of the word "COMPANY" now abbreviated as "CO".

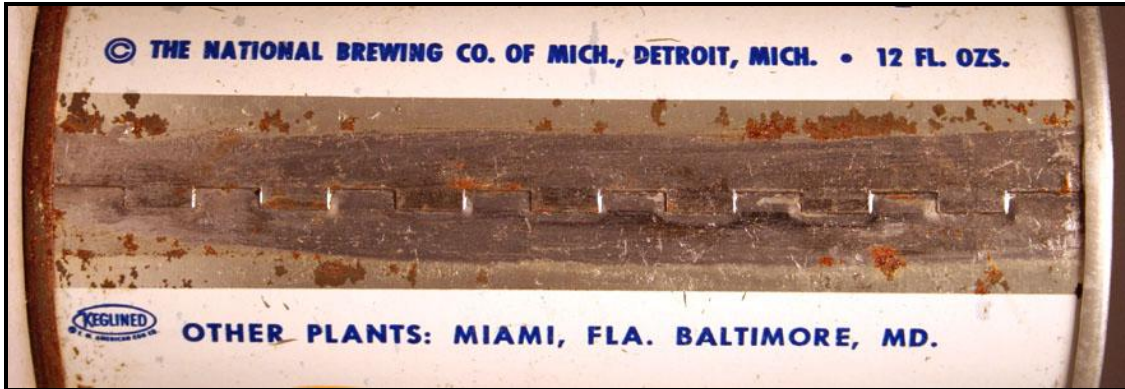
The following picture is of an offgrade 12oz flat top, also from Miami, and has the same mandatory as the 16oz. On the pint flat top there is text "16 FL OZS – 1 PINT" while the smaller can has simply "CONTENTS 12 FL OZS."



Colt 45 12oz Flat Top

Colt 45 Malt Liquor – Zip Tabs

Next in chronological order (or first variation of Colt 45 Malt Liquor cans from the Detroit brewery since I don't believe Detroit produced Colt 45 flat tops) we have the new invention of the zip tab:



Earliest Colt 45 Zip Tab - 1

Similar to the Miami flat top mandatory, we now have the “Of Mich” added, specifically “THE NATIONAL BREWING CO. OF MICH., DETROIT, MICH.” And “OTHER PLANTS: MIAMI, FLA. BALTIMORE, MD”. This now more closely matches some of the older red National Bohemian flat tops (except Miami is listed instead of Orlando). The above example is the earliest Colt 45 Malt Liquor zip top design since the top lid has no pressure bead and no printed instructions (Figure 1).

Figure 1



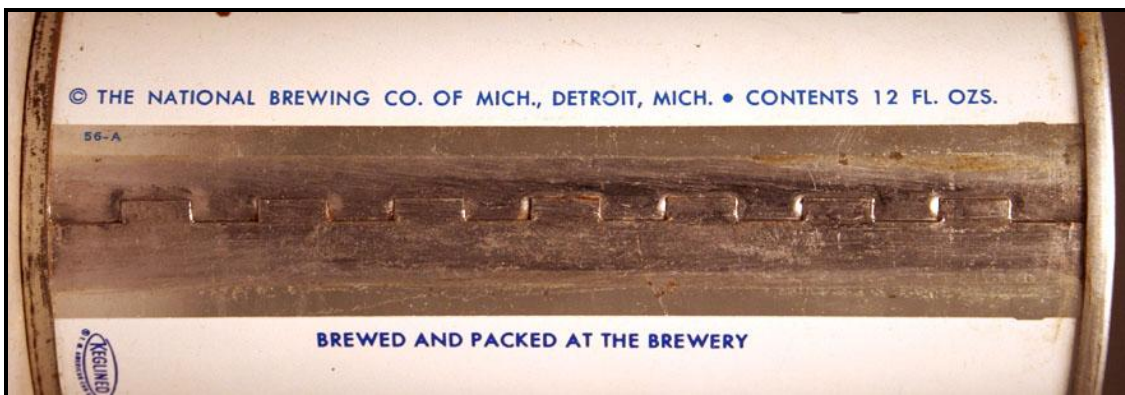
Figure 2



The later zip top designs have both pressure beads and the text “LIFT TAB & PULL” (Figure 2) and has a changed brewery mandatory, no longer listing “OTHER PLANTS”, being replaced with the text “BREWED AND PACKED AT THE BREWERY”, with two variations pictured below:



Colt 45 Zip Tab - 2



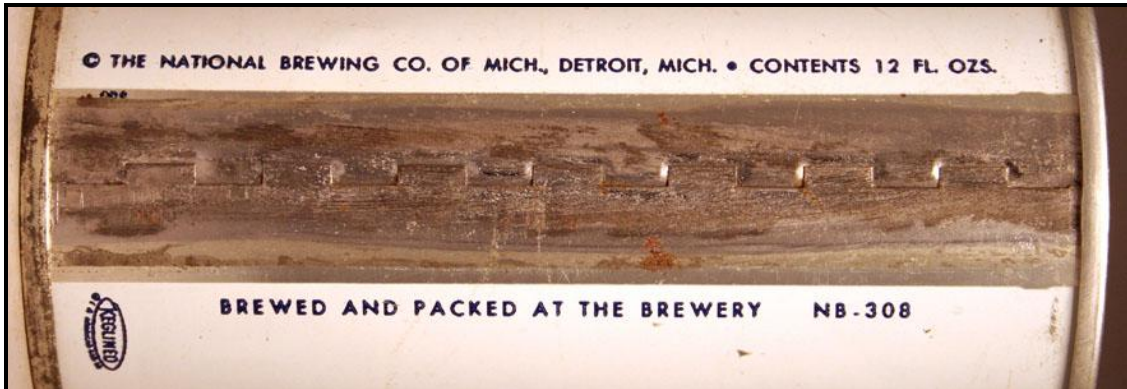
Colt 45 Zip Tab - 3

While the same style of brewery mandatory, did you notice the other variations between the two zip tabs? The first has the text “12 FL. OZS” and the American Keglined oval parallel to the seam. The second has the text “CONTENTS 12 FL. OZS” and the Keglined oval now perpendicular to the seam.

Especially make note of the style of the American Can Company canning code appearing on these earlier zip tab designs, with the Keglined oval, not the more modern “A”.

Colt 45 Malt Liquor – Pull Tabs

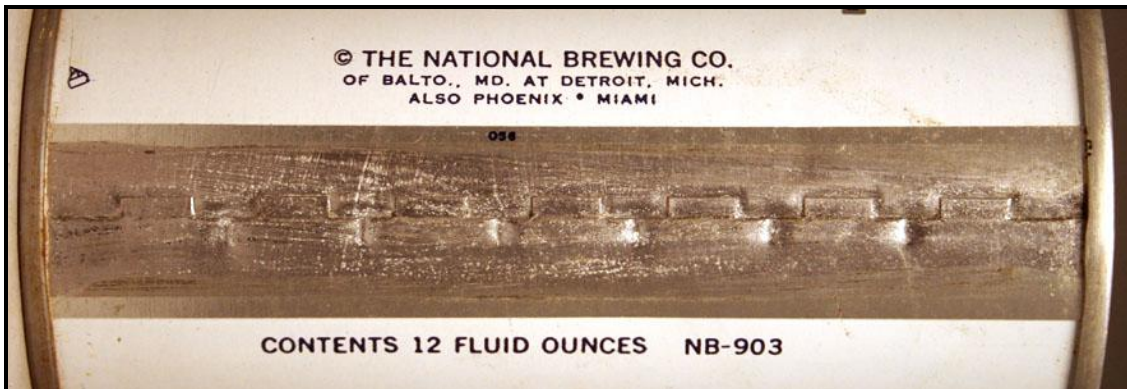
After the short lived zip tab (probably less than two years), National continued with the same basic Colt 45 Malt Liquor design for a much longer timer, with several mandatory styles. The first matches the last zip tab style with the exception of the added “NB – 308” or “NB – 903”. Seems pretty obvious the “NB” is for National Brewing and the 308 and 903 either plant number or additional canning code/design info:



Colt 45 Pull Tab - 1

The above design has numerous minor canning company and canning code variations, as well as “purple” versus “dark blue” Colt 45 coloring, all of no interest to most collectors.

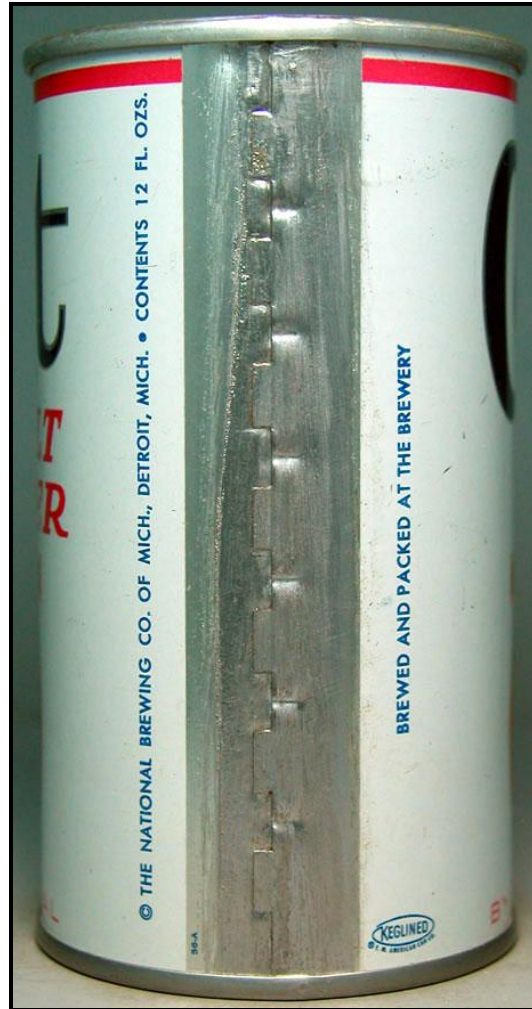
After years of the above, the mandatory then transitions to the following style, with again many minor variations in canning company and canning code. Gone is the “BREWED AND PACKED AT THE BREWERY”, and National now includes Phoenix as an additional brewery location.



Colt 45 Pull Tab - 2

Rare Colt Malt Lager Zip Tab?

C'mon, a rare Colt can? Tons of the Colt 45 Malt Liquor cans were marketed across the United States, and Malt Lager cans toward the east. My understanding some states had strange alcohol laws and National wasn't allowed to market a "Malt Liquor" into those states so opted to use the "Malt Lager" instead. Mass quantities of the Malt Liquor came out of Detroit, and while less common, still quantity of the Malt Lager out of Baltimore. However, take a look at the following:



Did you notice the brewery mandatory above, which includes the text "OF MICH., DETROIT, MICH"? Yes, so what? Well at this writing only three known Detroit examples of the Colt Malt Lager can have been documented. Yes, it is still a Colt Malt Lager can but Detroit much harder to find than Baltimore. My guess is there are more Detroit examples out there, just that most collectors don't care about these variations.

Where is the “super rare” Detroit Colt 45 flat top?

Where? Well, in my opinion no such real example from Detroit exists, and National began filling as zip tops out of Detroit from day one, never looking back. The following beer can was photographed for the Michigan Beer Cans (MBC) project, and it does indeed have a flat top lid, but my opinion not a real Detroit flat top:



Note a number of problems with the above “flat top”. First, the brewery mandatory is all wrong, including the Phoenix brewery and style looking more like the more modern tab top design. If real flat top it should have style nearly matching the early zip tabs. Second, the American Can Company logo “A” is wrong vintage. If a real flat top it should have the older Keglined oval, and probably running parallel to the seam. Note that both photographed Miami flat tops are from Continental Can Company, not American.

And finally, note the red lines along the seam and red paint near bottom rim, including various rub marks around the entire can. My theory this is a newer Colt 45 flat sheet, reused for another brewery/brand/state which was still using flat top lids, and the above is simply a paint-over that has been rubbed out. Yes, with lots of tedious work it is possible to remove a top layer of paint, even up towards the rims.

Well what about those Detroit Colt 45 flat tops which appeared on Ebay couple years back, or the one in a dealer’s tote at KC convention with \$450 sticker price. Sorry, those known examples are relidded cans, confirmed by the person doing the relidding, and not real flat tops. This is a touchy subject and I would rather discuss in person, not written down. My opinion, to date there is no known real Detroit Colt 45 flat top.