From Vin Mariani to For His Son (1912)

The inspiration for director David Wark Griffith’s short film For His Son (1912) can be traced backward to the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, from there to the original Coca-Cola formula, and ultimately to Vin Mariani the popular and legal coca wine first sold in the 1860s. Griffith’s melodrama has the editing and naturalistic acting found in his best-known films, giving power to this simple story about addiction. In the movie, a physician (Charles Hill Mailes) will do anything to earn money for his college-age son (Charles West). An early intertitle says the physician decides to “concoct a soft drink with cocaine” as he reads a recipe from a book. He sells it in drugstores as DOPOKOKE and it becomes a huge success. Eventually the physician’s secretary (Dorothy Bernard) and his son move on to the “Cocaine” powder, a jar of which is in the physician’s safe. When the son’s fiancée (Blanche Sweet) learns the son is injecting cocaine, she leaves him. The son runs away with the secretary and they live meagerly. The son dies of a heart attack and the father arrives too late to save him. R. K. Klepper’s critical guide Silent Films, 1877-1996: A Critical Guide to 646 Movies, (1999, Jefferson NC: McFarland) stated that this was among the first movies to deal with the problem of drug addiction.

D. W. Griffith was born in Kentucky and would likely have known the story of Atlanta pharmacist John Pemberton and his invention of Coca-Cola. Between 1886 and 1907, Coca-Cola was made from a mixture of extracts from coca leaves and cola nuts. A chemical analysis performed in 1917 determined that it contained one mg cocaine per fluid ounce (J. P. Street, 1917, The Composition of Certain Patent and Proprietary Medicines, Chicago: American Medical Association). It is important to note that Dopokoke in the movie contains pure cocaine and not just coca extract, suggesting its cocaine content would have been much higher. In 1906, Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act that required greater control over the sale of narcotics and the stimulant cocaine. This sort of attention hurt sales so the coca extract in Coca-cola was replaced with a sugar solution in 1907. The rest as they say is history.

Before Atlanta pharmacist John Pemberton invented Coca-Cola in 1886, he invented Peruvian Coca Wine in 1884. It was an imitation of the well-known Vin Mariani sold everywhere in the world but that was most popular in the United States. Pemberton had to switched the wine to cola extract (which added the nonaddictive stimulant caffeine) after Atlanta voted itself “dry” in 1886.

In about 1863, Angelo Mariani was inspired to begin cultivating coca plants in his greenhouse in Neuilly on the Seine, just outside Paris. He stimulated the plants to produce the highest amounts of the bitter alkaloid and then masked the taste of the coca extract by adding it to red wine from Burgundy to create a marriage made in heaven that he named Vin Mariani (see Figure). He also marketed Mariani elixirs (cocaine dissolved in alcohol), Mariani lozenges, and Mariani teas. As mentioned above, the American Medical Association published the cocaine content of a variety of patent medicines in 1917. They reported that Vin Mariani contained 6-8 milligrams per ounce, much higher than Coca-cola.
During the 1890s to 1910s, Mariani’s most famous advertising gimmick was to send a case of *Vin Mariani* to prominent artists, royalty, scientists, heads of state, authors, religious leaders, etc. and ask them for an endorsement and a photo. Their responses would be sent as advertisements to newspapers. *Vin Mariani* became the most popular of the legal cocaine products sold in the United States and inspired many imitators.