

MUMBAI CAPITAL

A spoonful of stevia

SWEET EDGE

Stevia, a natural sweetener, is derived from a plant grown both locally and imported from countries with tropical and sub-tropical climates

**CONSUMPTION OF STEVIA
(in tonnes)**

2013

2014

925.20
World1,019.30
World115.50
Asia Pacific138.50
Asia Pacific

India: Products yet to be launched

SOURCE: EUROCHOCOLATE INTERNATIONAL



BOTH AMUL, INDIA AND MOTHEE DAIRY are working on stevia-based products, and expect to introduce these in the market in a year

India is just waking up to the leaf that sweetens, but its slightly bitter aftertaste could put off potential users. Globally, consumption of stevia has been low

Next Diwali or Christmas, when you shop for fruit juices, drinks, yoghurt and lassi, a 'Made with Stevia' label on packaged beverages and dairy products may grab your attention.

Approval from the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) last month has propelled companies to explore products made from stevia, a natural sweetener, derived from a plant that is both grown locally and imported from countries that have a tropical and sub-tropical climate. Companies plan to roll out a few options initially, growing the range depending on consumer interest.

Amul India, for instance, plans to unveil stevia products in a calibrated manner. The company has begun trials to see if it can roll out a stevia-based dairy product. "We would like to take our time to formulate the right product because our experience shows taste is of prime concern to consumers," said MD, RS Sodhi.

Indeed, some consumers may find stevia's mildly bitter aftertaste unappealing. Kishore Pasari, 62, a South Mumbai resident who has been suffering from acute diabetes for the past 25 years, said the taste is a downer for him. "I've tried putting the leaf in tea as a substitute for sugar but the taste puts me off and does not satisfy the sugar craving."

Priya Shah, (22, name changed), an obesity patient, said she would rather not eat sweets than consume stevia-made desserts or beverages. "Either you indulge or you don't," she said.

Taste or health?

While taste is an issue with some consumers, the health benefits are immense. For one, it is healthier than aspartame, an artificial sweetener commonly known as 'chemical poison'. "Excess consumption of aspartame can lead to deterioration of brain and nerve cells. Stevia on the other hand, is 100 per cent herbal, helps to lower blood pressure and does not aggravate blood sugar levels," said Pooja Goel, a Bandra-based nutritionist.

In the past few years, health-conscious consumers have increased their preference for grains like ragi and bajra. Similarly, nutritionists and experts expect consumers to warm up to the benefits of stevia in the coming years. Hence, the success of stevia will depend on how consumers respond and whether a diabetic India makes the seemingly right choice.

Stevia is also a good flavour enhancer, said Leena Mittal of Herboveda India, wholesale suppliers of stevia and stevia-based products. "It's a great substitute for aspartame. We've replaced cane sugar with stevia in lemon water and some desserts and you can't tell the difference."

Here's the secret of how Herboveda India has managed to cut the bitter aftertaste. Stevia comes from a leafy green plant and its leaves contain compounds called steviol glycosides and rebaudioside. The former is 200 to 400 times sweeter than table sugar and leaves a slightly bitter aftertaste, but rebaudioside apparently has no such flavour. Herboveda India imports this Korea and China.

Food and beverage companies in India are willing to spend on sourcing stevia and exploring this untapped market, provided they get a right product formulation. Delhi-based Mother Dairy is one such example, and is eager to explore a domestic health-conscious market. "The FSSAI move is a positive one and we will now hasten the process of formulation," said S Nagarajan, CEO, Mother Dairy.

The company is into research and development and is hopeful that in 12 months, it will have innovated a beverage product in the beverage category using stevia. Currently, it offers more than 12-14 varieties of fruit juices and drinks under the brand name Safal.

Getting the formula right

A lot of factors will need to be considered while formulating the right product, though, said Dr TSR Murali, R&D head, Mother Dairy. On the one hand, it would have to be zero calories, nutritional and healthy and on the other, it has to be delicious and have a shelf life.

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Given the initial excitement, it was expected to be worth a billion dollars but its bitter aftertaste has generated a slow response.

The USFDA approved the use of stevia extracts in 2008. The global volume consumption of stevia products is just about 1,019 tonnes in 2014 as compared to 925 tonnes in 2013 (see chart), according to data provided by Euromonitor International. There is no data available for India as it's a market that is just beginning to open itself to the stevia experiment. However, even globally, manufacturers haven't designed any product that is 100 per cent stevia-based and offers great taste, said Mother Dairy's Dr Murali.

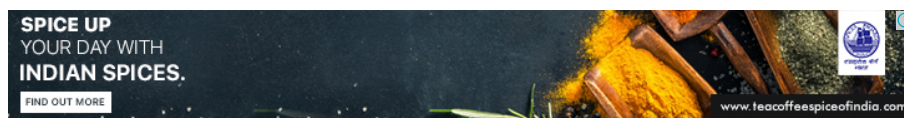
Mother Dairy could roll out a beverage if initial research indicates a consumer acceptable product and medium complexity in development, he added.

It would need trials in adapting it to both categories of fruit juices and dairy products like lassi. "The acid types and levels in each product are different and we have to test it on both product categories to see the best mix, suitability and shelf life," he said.

Even though companies are doing a toss-up between taste and health, consumers may be opening up to the idea. "The more the merrier! I have no diabetes and a zero-calorie dessert means I can keep them coming," said Biju Gupta, a dessert lover.

The writer is a freelance business journalist

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