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### Stevia in a tea cup

Stevia is a 'honey-leaf' plant that is about a 100 times sweeter than sugar in its natural state, and much more so when processed. It can sweeten any drink, has no calories, does not cause tooth decay and is diabetic safe.



IF YOU knew Nilgiris outlets have a 'diabetic' counter you would also know they stock small packets of 'di-aet' with the 'e' encroaching on 'a'. What do you ask for - 'diet' or 'dietee'? The blurb says this is a drink that is 'naturally sweet with the goodness of tea'. The contents of the carton are listed as *Camelia Sinensis* (which is tea in English) and *Stevia Rebaudiana Bertoloni* in infusion bags.

While you ponder over the alluring Italian addition to the 'cup that cheers' you notice the claim in the corner — sugar not required. Back home, open the box to more surprises. Pick one of the 25 sachets, drop it in a cup of really hot water. While you are waiting, take out the flat stick at the bottom and use it to swirl and fish out the bag. Sip the tea now. It is sweet! It must be Stevia....

*Stevia rebaudiana*, a wonder herb has been used for centuries by the Guarani Indians of Paraguay both as a sweetener and as medicine. It was "discovered" by Dr. Moises Santiago Bertoni, the director of the College of Agriculture in Asuncion, who was exploring the jungles of Paraguay. He first heard of the herb in 1887, and saw a live plant in 1903. He later said of this herb, "the sweetening power of kaa he-e (the native name for the Stevia plant) is so superior to sugar that there is no need to wait for the results of analyses and cultures to affirm its economic advantage...the simplest test proves it." Since then tests have proved this 'honey-leaf' plant is about a 100 times sweeter than sugar in its natural state, and much more so when processed. It can sweeten any drink, has no calories, no carbohydrates and hence causes no tooth decay and is diabetic safe. Doctors claim that it nourishes the pancreas, and does not raise blood glucose levels. Others say with no calories or carbohydrates Stevia is an excellent weight loss aid. It does not contain any of the side effects reported with the use of artificial sweeteners, including aspartame.

Its medicinal uses reportedly include regulating blood sugar, preventing hypertension, treatment of skin disorders, and prevention of tooth decay. Other studies show that it is a natural antibacterial and antiviral agent as well.

In the 1960s Japan, there was a popular movement against adding chemicals such as artificial sweeteners to food. Manufacturers there were on the look-out for a natural alternative to sugar, and Stevia was introduced to the Japanese market in 1970. It is currently used in many products there (including cola, desserts, and gum) and makes up 40 per cent of the Japanese sweetener market.

Like other natural sweeteners such as honey and maple syrup, Stevia has its own special flavour and does not taste exactly like sugar. You may not like the way it tastes in coffee, but find it great with tea. Unlike artificial sweeteners, it doesn't break down with heat, so you can learn to cook with it too.

"Stevia sweetened tea is best drunk black," says Shivakumar, Director, Diēt. "Its faint leafy smell is enhanced by milk." After managing tea for AV Thomas in Papua New Guinea, he hopped to cardamom planting, skipped to spice oils and oleoresins before he stumbled on this wonder plant. He faithfully tried to grow the seeds his wife brought from the US, gave up and now buys it from Hosur farmers. "Diēt is a mix of six Nilgiris and Assam teas to get the colour. I use the spare capacity of a tea-processing unit in Coimbatore to put the teas and sweetener together and get them bagged. There is no residue in the liqueur." Why not a similar coffee bag? "Doesn't work because of short shelf life."

A. Sai of Richsaai sees a growing market for Stevia in Chennai. "I have been raising Stevia crops in Bangalore since 1993," beams this farmer-marketer. "You propagate it by planting the top part of a three-foot tall plant. From the fourth month onwards the yield for an acre is 200 kg a month. Ooty's Botanical Gardens will be supplying Stevia leaves to anyone who cares to have it." Stevia is best taken as a liquid to get rid of its odd aftertaste, he informs. "Boil leaf or powder for five minutes with 20 times its volume of water and cool for 10 hours. Twenty-five drops of this liquid is enough to sweeten your coffee." He sees a whole supermarket of applications for this liquid. "Stevia-added fruit squashes will soon flow in Chennai markets," he says.

"Stevia syrup can be used to make diabetic-safe sweets and cakes," says MP Saravanan of Patsen, a Biotech firm that hopes to launch it in April. We hope to remove its odd-tasting compound to make it acceptable."

Dr. V. Mohan, diabetologist, endorses Stevia's ability to reduce intake of calories if used instead of sugar. "Animal studies have proved its beneficial effects," he says. "Decent journals have recognised its hypo-glycaemic and anti-lipid properties. Of course more human studies are needed to prove all this." Contact Richsaai at 2617 1665 Shivakumar at 2234 2710.

G.P.

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