

## Nutraceuticals –A Healthy Alternative to Soft Drinks

It wasn't all that long ago when we wanted a healthy alternative to our favorite soft drink, we reached for a glass of orange juice or grapefruit juice. But for many of us, that wasn't enough. So, the "nutraceutical" market was born. (Nutraceuticals are beverages which are a combination of natural ingredients enhanced with herbs or supplements which are said to be beneficial to both the mind and body.) And, according to a recent Newsweek article, "nutraceuticals have become the cornerstone of the \$27 billion alternative medicine industry."

With the rapidly growing numbers of health conscious consumers, many juice and tea companies are now turning their sights to promoting healthy, herb-enhanced drinks, trying to grab their share of this runaway market. (Wouldn't you?)

Stroll through the supermarket, check out the drugstore, and look in the refrigerator case at your favorite deli. Whatever your mood, or state of mind or body, there is an herb-enhanced drink out there for you. There are herbs for energy, ones to help you chill out, and others to boost your immune system as well as your brain. And that's just the beginning. That said, here's a brief 'tour' of several companies and their healthful beverage offerings. Space requirements do not allow me to talk about all the companies in the nutraceutical drink business, but you can find some useful info on certain herbs which are added to beverages, below.

Take **Fresh Samantha's** of Saco, Maine. In their 16-ounce plastic containers (with funky labels and fun names) you'll find fresh squeezed fruit and vegetable juices and smoothies, as well as a number of herb- and vitamin-enhanced drinks. Most of them have a creamy, tapioca-like consistency, and present a refreshing alternative to soft drinks. Fresh Samantha's Super Juice has Vitamin C and Echinacea added for immune system boosting, while Protein Blast is a fruit juice and soy combo. The Big Bang contains many ingredients, among which are spirulina for energy and protein, dulse, a sea vegetable rich in proteins, and wheat grass which helps build red blood cells. Then there's Get Smart with Ginkgo and Gotu Kola for brainpower, and the newest Vanilla Almond Soy shake. These can be found in the refrigerator cases in most supermarkets and eateries. Note: In case you're wondering what happened to their Spirulina Fruit Blend, although it was a "healthy" drink, it was not amongst the top sellers, and has been discontinued.

American Marketing Technology Group out of Buffalo Grove, Illinois offers the **Alter Ego** line of healthful beverages made from natural fruits, juices and flavors, standardized herbal extracts and crystalline fructose (fruit sugar which is the sweetest of all naturally occurring sugars) in handy 10 ounce bottles. Need a brain boost? Alter Ego's blackberry-flavored "Smartness Enhancer" combines Siberian Ginseng, Fo-ti and Ginkgo Biloba. Need to chill out? The "Body Relaxer" is an exotic fruit juice combo enhanced with Chamomile, Kava Kava and Valerian. Alter Ego's fruit juice smoothies (made with 35% juice) offer tasty flavors like Strawberry Pear, Peach Orange and Mango Pineapple. Herbs found in smoothies include St. John's Wort, Chamomile, Aloe Vera, and Ginkgo Biloba. (St. John's Wort is used for depression, Chamomile is a traditional remedy for stress, Aloe Vera soothes stomach irritation, and has anti-inflammatory properties as well as laxative properties, Ginkgo is used for improved brain function.) The milligram amount

of herbs in each bottle is listed right on the label. Available at Osco Drug and Shaw's Supermarkets.

**SoBe**, made by the South Beach Beverage Company of Norwalk, Connecticut, has an extensive line of 20-ounce beverages available in most supermarkets and drugstores. Their labels say that their beverages were formulated to "Uplift the mind, body and spirit with exotic teas and juice blends whose health benefits have been enhanced by the addition herbs, nutrients and other natural supplements, (as well as high fructose corn syrup). Other beverages, with names like "Eros" and "Energy" allude (heavily) to the benefits you'll derive from these. For instance, Eros contains Damiana (a purported aphrodisiac), Fo-ti (an awareness intensifier) and Dong quai (a hormone balancer). "Energy" contains Guarana, Yohimbe and Arginine. (Guarana is potent natural caffeine, Yohimbe is a hormone stimulant and Arginine is an amino acid needed for protein synthesis.)

SoBe Essentials, their newest line of slightly and lightly flavored green teas in smaller 14 ounce bottles, are supplemented with herbs like Siberian Ginseng, Reishi mushrooms, Damiana, Yerba Mate, Red Clover, Suma, and Schizandra. They profess to be enlightening, energizing and uplifting herbal tonics. You decide. As with Alter Ego, the SoBe Essential label shows you just how much of what herb is contained in each bottle.

Okay, so you got the abbreviated tour through herb-enhanced health drinks. They all sound refreshing and flavorful (some more than others), giving us more than flavored sugar water and empty calories. But how much more? Are there any real advantages to drinking these drinks. Most of them contain sugar, in one form or another (cane sugar, crystalline fructose, high fructose corn syrup). So what, if any benefits, can we derive from them?

Gary Kracoff, Natick resident and a registered pharmacist for over 20 years at Bailey's Pharmacy in Brighton, has also been trained in herbs, supplements and homeopathy. He gave his views on these herb-supplemented health drinks.

"People want to be healthy and feel healthy. And we all want a quick fix, but as far as these herbally enhanced drinks," says Kracoff, "even though they're better than Coke or Pepsi for you, the amount of herbs added isn't enough to make a difference. So when you're talking therapeutic value, there isn't a lot."

We tend to want to believe what we read on the product labels—especially things like getting great health benefits from just a 12-ounce serving of a beverage. And even though these drinks may contain ingredients that are good for us, says Kracoff, "We shouldn't be substituting these drinks for vitamins or supplements, or a balanced diet. Otherwise, you'd be drinking some of these drinks ten times a day, and still you wouldn't be getting as much benefit as you would from a standardized herbal supplement."

With regard to certain herbs, Kracoff says to know what you're drinking. For those with sensitive systems, he says that you might want to limit aloe vera since it may give you diarrhea. "And don't be misled into thinking that the quick energy fix you'll get from a juice supplemented with the herb guarana, a natural caffeine, will have any kind of lasting value – it might give you a temporary boost, but it may also end up giving you the jitters."

With the hectic lives that most of us lead, when we grab for refreshment, we want to get as much as possible in as short a time as possible. Sure, we know that there are no substitutes for eating right and exercising but, at some level, we all want to buy into the illusion of

health on demand, and we don't seem to mind paying the \$1.50 to \$3 a bottle for it.  
Bottoms up, but don't forget to take your vitamins!

##

---

## **SIDE BAR**

### **Uses of Certain Herbs**

Aloe Vera – internally, it soothes stomach irritation; has anti-inflammatory, as well as laxative properties

Astragalus – immune booster

Chamomile - calms and soothes

Damiana – energy tonic and purported aphrodisiac

Dong quai - hormone balancer, calms nerves

Echinacea – immune system booster

Fo-ti – used to intensify awareness

Ginkgo Biloba – improves brain function by increasing circulation

Goto Kola - aids memory, increases vitality, eases depression

Green Tea - helps draw out and remove impurities in the body

Guarana – a potent natural caffeine

Kava Kava - promotes body relaxation

Schizandra – used to combat fatigue

Siberian Ginseng – used to enhance energy, vitality, endurance

Spirulina – excellent source of protein and energy

St. John's Wort - natural anti-depressant

Suma – immune booster; combats stress and fatigue

Valerian - calms the nervous system

Yerba Mate - cleanses the blood; stimulates the mind

Yohimbe – a hormone stimulant