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Stevia Set to Become the Sweetener of Choice?

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Nov 11, 2008 - **A look at new product activity reveals that stevia containing products are already appearing in the US in limited numbers, all marketed as dietary supplements, which is currently the only application that the US authorities allow.**



11/11/08 The recent approval for the use of stevia as a food and beverage ingredient in Australia and New Zealand has resulted in a torrent of speculation about the potential for its use in the US and EU markets, both of which currently do not permit it. A look at new product activity on the Innova Database (www.innovadatabase.com), however, reveals that products are already appearing in the US in limited numbers, all marketed as dietary supplements, which is currently the only application that the US authorities allow.

Stevia is extracted from the leaves of the Stevia Rebaudiana plant that grows wild in Paraguay and is now grown commercially in Asia, South Africa and South America. It has been used by the native populations of South America for centuries to sweeten bitter-tasting drinks and is about 100 to 300 times sweeter than sugar. Its leading market is Japan, where it has been in use as a food and beverage sweetener since the 1970s. The Innova Database recorded over 120 launches containing stevia over the 12 months to the end of October 2008, and over 50 of those were in Japan, where product launches were led by savoury snacks and biscuits, with over 30 of the total, although yoghurts, soft drinks, fish products, baby foods and even mayonnaise were also launched using the sweetener.

Perhaps more surprisingly, launches recorded in the US by Innova numbered 40 over the same period, including soft drinks, powdered drink mixes, tea, a snack bar and even root beer, as well as a number of sweetener type products, including Stevia extracts in liquid and powder form from companies such as Now Foods and LifeSource Nutrition. "These products were all marketed as dietary supplements in order to comply with US regulations" reports Innova Market Insight's Head of Research Lu Ann Williams. "Products have traditionally been in the form of powders and mixes, but more ready-to-consume products are now appearing as the market becomes more mainstream." Recent introductions include the Zevia range of sugar-free carbonates sweetened with stevia and promoted on a natural sweetening platform, Steaz Diet Sparkling Green Tea, Virgil's Diet Root Beer and Genuine Health's Satisfiber+ Express Fiber Bar. These are all positioned as dietary supplements, as are a number of what are effectively tabletop sweeteners, although they are not allowed to be marketed as such. These include the Sweete Natural Stevia Sweetener, which uses two stevia components – stevioside and the steviol glycoside Rebaudioside A.

More interesting still perhaps is the move by mainstream soft drinks companies into the stevia arena, with joint ventures between Coca-Cola and Cargill and PepsiCo and Whole Earth Sweetener Co (part of Merisant) moving to declare self-affirmed GRAS (generally recognised as safe) status for Reb-A, one of stevia's sweetest components and use it as a beverage ingredient and in tabletop sweeteners in the US. The Coke-Cargill product is called rebiana and uses the brand Truvia, while PepsiCo and Whole Earth's product is marketed as PureVia.

The first mainstream soft drinks company to launch a range of drinks sweetened with stevia was PepsiCo, with the August 2008 launch of a fortified water range under the SoBe Life name. Initially launched in Peru, the product is expected to be launched across Latin America, another region where stevia is permitted. Brazil has also seen some product activity using stevia, but in more specialist products, such as the Matte Leo Cha Mate tea mix in natural and guarana flavours, and actually using the Stevia name for its Stevia Plus Gelatina Light light jelly mix in a range of fruit flavours.

"Despite the high levels of interest, this has yet to be reflected in radical growth in the overall number of product launches using stevia" reports Lu Ann Williams. "Numbers recorded by Innova have remained relatively static globally over the past three years at between 120 and 135. There is clearly demand for a new sweetener with a natural positioning in many quarters, not least the carbonated soft drinks industry, and it is pressure from this area that may result in the market being opened up to a whole new generation of products in new geographical areas."

Meanwhile ChromaDex have announced that it has entered into an exclusive agreement with Cargill to supply global analytical reference standards and research materials for the individual sweet components of stevia. This provides the ability for food and beverage companies to validate rebiana for use in consumer products. With the introduction of Truvia rebiana natural sweetener by Cargill, there is a need to insure the quality of stevia related products. These new analytical reference methods will provide that industry standards set for rebiana meet specifications of consistency and quality. Rebiana is a natural product originating with the leaves of the stevia plant. Previously, there were no accepted standards of identity for food and beverage companies to use to evaluate stevia-based products. ChromaDex and Cargill have partnered to create the quality assurance and research tools necessary for analytical testing of stevia based products, from raw material to finished sweeteners such as rebiana.