Brewing Up Good Health

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Ready-to-drink tea continues to be a hot beverage category, thanks in large part to the health "halo" associated with tea—high in antioxidants and other health-boosting ingredients. In fact, according to Chicago-based Mintel, despite the recession, RTD tea is anticipated to grow to $1.4 billion in retail sales in 2011, up 15 percent from 2009.

At the same time, coffee extracts can help beverage marketers develop functional beverages that deliver energy from a natural source as well. Natural sources of caffeine, such as guarana, coffee and green tea, can offer sustained energy. Some energy drinks, like Monster Hammer X-press, combine coffee extract with more tried-and-true energy drink ingredients like taurine to pack a powerful energy punch.

"We are seeing tea and coffee extracts being used more and more in functional beverages especially beverages positioned as rich in antioxidants, heart healthy and for weight management," says Heather Biehl, manager, H.I.T.S., Wild Flavors, Inc. "Consumers are definitely aware of the antioxidant health benefits associated with tea, but the awareness of coffee's health benefits is just beginning to grow. Most of these beverages are still tea and coffee based however; we are seeing enhanced waters, shots and fruit juice beverages containing tea extracts."

Consumers are now familiar with specific antioxidants found in tea and other herbal ingredients that are purported to have cancer-fighting abilities as well as generally supporting good health. With the most powerful among these a polyphenol called epigallocatechin gallate (EGCG). With consumers now concerned about the level of antioxidant protection in a particular beverage, beverage companies are now incorporating antioxidants like EGCG into non-tea beverages in order to market their beverages based on its ORAC value. ORAC stands for oxygen radical absorbance capacity and its used as a way of measuring the level of antioxidant protection capacity of a product.

WILD developed an Antox Blend that includes rooibos tea extract, green tea extract, white tea extract and grape seed extract. It is a balanced blend of flavonoid compounds with an ORAC value of 6,000 per gram, according to Biehl.

"Consumers seems to be really tuning into the health benefits of tea and coffee and manufacturers are adjusting and adding these products more and more into their formulations," says Greg Robertson, president of Teewolf, a natural and functional ingredient supplier. "Depending on the application and the desires of the customer, we have different products for different finished products, such as clear tea extracts that are stabilized and impart a tea flavor without impacting color. We also offer super concentrated green tea extract that maximizes the polyphenol content."

Fueled by the health halo surrounding tea, a number of new, more exotic types of tea are hitting the mainstream market. Kombucha, a type of fermented tea, has become a hit in the natural food channel with sales growing 10 percent from 2008 to 2010 to $123 million, according to Mintel. An ancient healing tea from China called Pu erh also is making its way into the US tea market. Numi Organic Tea markets a line of RTD Pu erh teas blended with other teas like green or black tea and with traditional tea flavors like Jasmine, Mint and Earl Grey.