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FEATURE ARTICLE:

WHEN IS A BEVERAGE MORE THAN A DRINK?

BY HELEN BISHOP-MACDONALD



The Importance of Dairy in the Beverage Sector:

When is a Beverage More than a Drink?

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Unlike every other food in the world, except honey, milk's sole raison d'être is to be eaten. Sure, you can eat pigs and corn – but that's not why they exist. People may differ on whether or not animals should be eaten, but they generally misunderstand the nature of, say, bananas and carrots. These "foods" exist to ensure the propagation of the plant – not as a favour to humans.

Undeniably milk and honey have been designed as food, and man has been making use of them for at least 10,000 years. The honey offered sweetness and energy in a world sorely in need of it, but not much in the way of nutrients. Milk, on the other hand, provided and provides almost everything. Note the almost – milk isn't perfect. It lacks iron and vitamin C but if you were to be stranded on a desert island and could have only one food, milk would be the choice.

Is milk a food? Is it a drink? Well, it's both-and this dual personality has led to some difficulty in its positioning. As a food, it's unique, which is why it has its own food group. As a beverage, however, there are several up-start wannabes that would like to knock milk off its top perch. Juices, soft drinks, water, fortified plant juices, beer and wine all vie for position as Canada's favourite drink.

Nutrition-wise there's no contest. Milk wins hands-down over all its competitors. Take water as an example: Almost no nutrients except for a niggling amount of calcium. The bottled variety even costs more than milk but trendy types will shell out for "designer" waters so as to look cool. Some of the leading bottled waters have been found to come out of regular taps and others can boast a fairly high bacterial count.

What to do? Well for one thing, the fact that should be considered seriously is that milk contains mostly water! T-shirts, billboards, milk cartons should carry the claim: Drink Milk – it's 90% water! While it has been shown conclusively that the hype about people needing eight glasses of water a day is just that—pure hype—we do know that many people, seniors in particular, are insufficiently hydrated. Milk is the perfect solution to this problem, satisfying nutrient needs while providing necessary fluid. Not only that, milk is a great temperature regulator: a natural coolant on a hot summer's day, and when heated (hot chocolate, for example), a warming beverage in the winter! The current popularity of smoothies is evidence of the consumer's acceptance of milk in combination with other foods. Of Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating, the two food groups that are under-consumed are the milk products group

and the fruit/vegetable group. Smoothies (as long as they're made with milk and not soy juice) help increase consumption of both groups.

What other food/beverage can make the claim that if Canadians would consume just 3 to 4 glasses a day we could cut our health care costs by 20 billion over five years. A study stating just such a scenario has been published in the prestigious American Journal of Hypertension. Let's see colas make that claim!

Despite its obvious nutritional advantage, milk needs to tart itself up a bit if consumption is to increase. The addition of omega 3's is a step in the right direction – what better vehicle for nutraceuticals than milk? The Japanese are onto something using skimmed milk as the source of a calcium-rich miso (the very popular Japanese soup normally made with fermented soy). Who says soup isn't a beverage? This soup has three times the calcium usually found in miso and Canadians are becoming very fond of the stuff. Milk is appropriate for the addition of nutrients like folic acid, iron and vitamin C (already available in some brands), and ingredients like pectin can be added to give a fat-like mouth feel. Once the anti-carcinogenic value of conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) has been acknowledged by the powers-that-be, added CLA will be of paramount importance. People might even be clamoring for a higher-fat milk!

Of course there are many beverages already available that take advantage of milk's exceptional qualities. On a daily basis people exploit the convenience of a product like Instant Breakfast—saving time, but starting the day off well-

nourished. Flavoured UHT milks are finding their way into lunch packs for school or the office and, with increasing varieties to choose from, consumption has nowhere to go but up.

Seniors and those recovering from various illnesses have discovered the ease with which they can down a product like Ensure—which does pretty much what the name suggests: ensures optimum nutrition when regular meals aren't possible. Boost is a similar product—supplying all the nutrients from milk plus a little extra.

For the athlete, milk-based beverages are ideal for post-event recovery as well as muscle and bone maintenance during training. There is a wide variety of products from which the athlete can choose, but the common denominator among them is the unique convergence of nutrients that constitute milk.

Recent industry reports reveal that sales of nutraceutical beverages in Canada have grown by more than 20% from 2000 to 2003. As well, the diet beverage sector has increased rapidly over the last 4 years, growing by more than 100%. Although some suggest that these are niche markets, Canadian further processors would do well to take full advantage of the growth taking place in these particular sectors, which in the case of diet and nutraceutical beverages, are typically made up of skim milk powder and milk protein concentrate. Further growth is expected in these categories as health/weight conscious consumers look for a more convenient means of satisfying their nutritional and dietary requirements.

For the further processor the advantage, one is tempted to say, is obvious: the use of one basic product (milk) or its derivatives, helps their finished product deliver a vast array of nutrients to many different target groups...at an extremely reasonable price.

Finally, in this brief overview of “milk: the beverage”, I have to ask why the popular flavoured milks haven’t been sweetened with something like sucralose or aspartame. Yogurts have had artificial sweeteners for decades, why not these delicious milk drinks. Many who would like to enjoy them are turned off by the comparatively high calorie count; I’m quite sure they’d gobble up a low-calorie version. Milk truly is the ideal beverage...we need to take advantage of its full potential.

Admittedly, such artificially – sweetened milk drinks might already exist. Goodness knows I haven’t tried every milk beverage in Canada – but I’m working on it!