

Hey, don't 'bogart' that soda, my friend

In Los Angeles, where medical marijuana dispensaries outnumber Starbucks and McDonald's restaurants combined, a mood-altering beverage with a cannabis-oriented marketing campaign is gaining traction. Southern California has become the bestselling market for Mary Jane's Relaxing Soda, a sugary drink laced with kava, a South Pacific root purported to have sedative properties.

Matt Moody, a Denver nutritional supplement developer who created the beverage, said the name is an unabashed reference to weed, though the relaxant compounds in kava are chemically unrelated to those in marijuana.

Along with drinks like Slow Cow and Ex Chill, Mary Jane's is part of a new group of so-called slow-down or anti-energy drinks, which are expected to be among the top food trends of 2010, according to advertising agency J. Walter Thompson.

They rely on folk-medicine sedatives, including kava, camomile and valerian, to provide an alternative to caffeine-laced and jitter-inducing energy drinks such as Red Bull.

Ex Chill, for example, comes in an 8.4-ounce can that sells for \$2 at Albertsons, 7-Elevens and some Bristol Farms markets. Slow Cow, made by Boisson Slow Cow Inc. of Quebec, Canada, plans to start distribution in the U.S. this year.

The calming effect is probably real, said Michael Pollastri, a pharmaceuticals chemist at Boston University. Still, Kava warrants a closer look by drug chemists to figure out how it works as a relaxant and what else it might be useful for, but that work is just beginning, Pollastri said.

The Food and Drug Administration has issued a consumer warning that people with "liver disease or liver problems, or persons who are taking drug products that can affect the liver, should consult a physician before using kava-containing supplements." But the agency has not restricted sales of kava-based products.

Interestingly, about 70% of Mary Jane's retail sales are in Southern California, Moody said. The drink's market is so concentrated in the region that Moody plans to move the business to the Inland Empire.

The 7-Eleven stores stocking Mary Jane's sell the product at a rate of about 14 bottles a day, which is considered a healthy pace for a niche beverage, Moody said. It also sells in scattered bars and cafes and online through the Mary Jane's Soda website.

--Jerry Hirsch Photo: Detail of Mary Jane's Relaxing Soda, sold in some 7-Eleven stores. Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times.

About the Author

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