

FOODNEWS *news briefs*

Asahi beverages buy-out

ASAHI Breweries Ltd is launching a US\$477 million bid to buy out minority shareholders in Asahi Soft Drinks Co Ltd, as it seeks to reduce its reliance on Japan's sluggish beer market. Asahi Breweries currently owns 51% of Asahi Soft Drinks, Japan's fifth-largest non-alcoholic beverages firm and known for Wonda canned coffee and Mitsuya Cider carbonated drinks. Japan's beer market has shrunk by about 10% over the past decade as more people opt for cocktails and other alcoholic drinks. An ageing population that looks set to decline means the outlook for the next few years is bleak for brewers, and soft drinks are seen as a long-term opportunity.

Award for Quicornac

ECUADORIAN passion fruit processor, Quicornac, has been awarded the country's Agro-industry Of The Year award, following its nomination by the government of Los Rios Province. The award, recognising Quicornac's solid performance and the economic benefits it has brought thousands of passion fruit farmers, was presented on 6 October by the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa.

AJC prices stop rising

PRICES for apple juice concentrate (AJC) in Ukraine have stabilised, say *FOODNEWS* sources in the country. Falling demand from the EU means that processors in the country are quoting €1 500-1 800/tonne ex factory for unclarified concentrate and €1 800-2 100/tonne for clarified. Last year, Ukraine's AJC price was about €1 100-1 200/tonne ex factory.

Del Monte plant closure

DEL Monte is poised to close its fruit juice plant in West Lynn, eastern England. Staff at the facility have been given notice that it may close early next year. Del Monte is reported to be looking for a co-packer to produce its fruit juice, but nothing has yet been signed, staff have been told.

Best announces concentrate for energy drink applications

BY NEIL MURRAY

A SICILIAN juice processor is aiming to tap into the demand for energy drinks by supplying fruit purée and concentrate that is high in taurine, one of the key ingredients in Red Bull and similar energy/sports drinks.

Best started processing prickly pear (*opuntia ficus indica*, otherwise known as the cactus pear) on the island last year, and claims to be the only processor in Europe to have developed the technology and processing facilities for this particular fruit, although *FOODNEWS* knows of at least one other Italian company that is dabbling in prickly pear.

Mexico and the US both produce prickly pear purée and concentrate, and Thailand has also been named by one buyer in the UK as a supplier of the product.

In Sicily, its high taurine content has led to its being dubbed 'the natural Red Bull', and Best says that the fruit has been consumed for hundreds of years and prized for its minerals content and energy-giving properties.

"The juice is rich in amino acids (taurine and proline are the predominant amino compounds), and high in minerals such as magnesium and calcium," Best's marketing director,

South American CSDs surge lifts Femsa

FEMSA SAB, Latin America's largest beverage company, has announced a third-quarter profit rise of 10%, on higher Coca-Cola sales in South America.

The Mexican company's profits rose to MXN2.34 billion (US\$218.3 million) from MXN2.12 billion. Sales increased 7.2% to 36.7 billion, exceeding analysts' estimates.

Soft drinks sales have surged this year in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela as higher prices for commodities such as oil, steel, iron ore and grains drove economic growth in the region.

Walter Ansoorge, told *FOODNEWS*. "It can therefore be considered as a valuable natural ingredient for energy and sports drinks, which normally contain this, but sourced from a laboratory rather than a fruit."

Italian prickly pear, said Ansoorge, has a taurine content of 8-12mg/100g of fruit. "Since cactus pears are the richest plant source for taurine yet discovered, their application in functional drinks to replace synthetic or even animal derived sources appears to be very promising," he continued.

Applications

Best has identified a wide range of products besides energy drinks in which prickly pear juice could find a useful application, including smoothies, yogurts, tropical fruit mixes, ice cream and any beverage that needs a natural colouring agent.

Best adds that the natural colouring agents, betaxanthins and betacyanins, are well known as anti-ageing agents and give the juice a strong stable purple/red colour, which is carried over into blends.

Traders have told *FOODNEWS* that interest in prickly pear juice is sporadic, but growing, as blenders and developers look for new applications and flavours.

In the opinion of one buyer, its

Femsa's Coca-Cola unit will expand in Brazil after it agreed to buy Refrigerantes Minas Gerais Ltda (Remil), a Brazilian Coca-Cola bottler, from Coca-Cola Co for US\$380 million. The transaction will boost Coca-Cola Femsa's presence in Brazil by a third.

Last year, Femsa agreed to buy Jugos del Valle SAB, Mexico's second-largest juice maker, for US\$380 million to boost its non-carbonated beverage sales in Latin America (*FOODNEWS* 22 December 2006). Jugos del Valle also operates in Brazil.

very mild flavour (similar to melon or cucumber) can be construed either as an advantage or a disadvantage, depending on the application.

"A lot of people are talking about it, but nobody seems to be using it at the moment," he said.

"There are no huge health claims you can make for it, so its use seems to be as a filler, and it is quite expensive for that."

A second buyer was more enthusiastic, albeit still cautious, saying: "There are a few people in the UK doing things with it. It has a very high ascorbic acid content, and it is very red, so it's useful to add a colour to a tropical blend."

Its strong colour, says Best, means it is ideally suited to beverages where a 100% natural content is desirable.

The fruits used for Best's processing come exclusively from the slopes of Mount Etna in the Catania district, recognised by the EU as a certified geographic origin.

Production this year has been about 200 tonnes of 38 brix cloudy frozen purée (representing some 1 500 tonnes of fruit), a "small quantity" of organic concentrate and some single strength juice (organic and conventional).

Soft drinks boom

BULGARIAN soft drinks sales rose by 18% to 1.23 billion litres in January-September, according to the country's Association of Soft Drinks Producers.

Energy drinks and iced teas sales increased by 63% and 42%, respectively. Carbonated beverages also increased above the average, mainly due to diet drinks.

The association expects an increase in consumption per head of about 16% to 214 litres this year. The number of companies producing soft drinks decreased by 160 in the past 10 months to 310.