

How Plant-Based Brands Are Infiltrating the Beverage Industry

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Most of the beverages we drink on a regular basis are already plant-based: coffee, juice, tea, wine, beer and cider. Long before the modern environmental, health, and animal rights movements, virtually any beverage (except for dairy milk) people sip alongside their meals has come from a plant, be it directly or indirectly. Save for water, of course, which is obviously vegan-friendly, too. Whatever you're drinking, in many cases, people have been drinking it for centuries.

But maybe not. As you probably know, Coca-Cola was originally made with a derivative of the coca leaf – and in fact, a purified extract of it is still used for flavoring. But the majority of the ingredients in Coke and other popular beverages, both hard and soft, caffeinated and not, are more clinical than organic. You can't exactly fresh-squeeze the neon orange soda you're used to buying at the corner store.

Two or three generations of Americans have grown up on artificially flavored, processed soft drinks, but as of late it seems that the beverage industry is circling back to its origin: plants. In fact, the carbonated soft drinks category as a whole has been on a slow but steady decline for more than a decade. People want to know what they're putting in their bodies, and that means picking thirst quenchers with ingredients that obviously come from the earth and not a

laboratory.

Even so, many of us still have a lingering taste for the less-than-wholesome drinks we grew up on. After all, Coca-Cola was still worth over \$68 billion last year, followed by Red Bull, Diet Coke, and Pepsi.

And for that reason, despite all of the beverage choices already available to us, food and drink brands aren't done innovating. Hard and soft drink makers continue to formulate refreshments that taste good to contemporary palates while addressing consumers' concerns about their own health and broader ethical issues. And to do that, they're going back to basics.

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Nuts are the new fruits

Juice has, for decades, been caught between a rock and a hard place in terms of nutrition: Even the freshest juices with the fewest additives tend to be high in sugar and other carbohydrates, which is a turn-off to dieters despite the positive nutritional properties of fruit and veggies. One company is trying to change that – but with almonds. Not the creamy almond milk you might add to your coffee, though. Origin Almond has a line of cold-pressed almond juices that use fruit, herbs and spices for flavor. All of their beverages contain 5 grams of protein and no more than 3 net carbs, so not only are they vegan, but they're keto-friendly as well. Even low-carbers can enjoy fruity drinks like their Piña Colada and Hemp Mojito.

Smoothies sans sugar

But if you're one who prefers smoothies over juice, Splendid

Spoon has options for you. The meal delivery service is all vegan, gluten-free and non-GMO, but what really sets it apart from some comparable prepped meal plans is its emphasis on smoothies. Several of their smoothies, like the Orange Hibiscus, boast impressively low sugar counts for a fruit smoothie, clocking in at 6g or less. Their drinks contain trendy, nutrient-packed ingredients like goji and baobab. And if you don't have the appetite for a full smoothie? Their wellness shot might be what you're looking for.

Another company re-envisioning smoothies is Genius Juice, which positions its drinks as a better alternative to coconut juice. Their beverages are coconut smoothies, which they say are more satiating and nutritious than the juice alone. The drinks come in original, mocha and turmeric varieties, and as an added draw for the eco-conscious, Genius boasts being zero-waste – the coconut husk is upcycled for use in energy production and detoxification.

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Actual ginger, not ginger ale

Herbalism seems to be enjoying a comeback thanks to the wellness world, and the beverage sector is getting in on it, too. Instead of grabbing a can of ginger ale, which may or may not contain actual ginger, to ease an upset stomach, modern consumers can go for a beverage that actually includes 14,000mg of ginger or another herb. Goldthread Plant Tonics offers a line of health-focused drinks that are packed with natural ingredients, like lavender, turmeric and, yes, ginger. And apart from the herb blends, their drinks contain a little maple syrup for sweetness, water and nothing else.

Boozy-juicy is the next big thing

While alcohol is almost as old as mankind itself, the hard

beverage industry has continued to come up with not just new brews and hybrids, but new categories of drink altogether. The last few years gave us hard seltzer, which has been a hit with casual drinkers watching their carb intake. The category grew almost 200% in just the last year. Soon, those who want to imbibe with their health in mind will be able to sip hard pressed juices. Yep, like cold pressed juice, but boozy: Pulp Culture drinks, which launched this year, are fermented probiotic juices with no sugar and few calories. The much-anticipated brand is founded by notable vegan Brendan Brazier, a former triathlete and creator of Vega nutrition products. It will be interesting for those in the hard beverage space to see if hard juice enjoys a similar boom to that of hard seltzer.

While the biggest brands in the soft and hard beverage spaces aren't relinquishing their market share just yet, it's unlikely that cultural tides will turn back in the favor of sugar and artificial sweeteners. Decades ago, a diet soda was the healthy option, but today, customers are more discerning. And since people will always be thirsty for something that tastes good, we can only expect that wellness-focused brands will continue to try to quench them.

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