

## INNOVA MARKET INSIGHTS

### **Monk Fruit to Mirror Stevia's Success?**

As the sweetener stevia finally moves into the EU food market via France, interest is already turning to new quarters. Suggestions of a rival in the natural sweetener stakes have focused interest on *luo han guo* (*Siraitia grosvenori*/*Momordia grosvenori*), or monk fruit, a Chinese fruit 300 times sweeter than sugar and in use in China as a natural sweetener for hundreds of years.

A review of new product activity on the **Innova Database** reveals that activity in products containing *luo han guo* is largely confined to Asia, particularly China and Malaysia, and focused on its use as a sweetener, or in herbal teas or fruit products. Until now, regulatory issues mean that it has been confined to supplement-type products in the USA, with **Innova** reporting for 2010 launches mainly involving liquid, capsule and tea concentrate supplements. During 2009, Celestial Seasonings also launched an all-natural Gingerbread Spice Holiday Tea with *luo han guo* and Kellogg's Kashi Heart to Heart brand introduced a Warm Cinnamon Oat Cereal with *luo han guo* fruit concentrate.

The early part of 2010 saw NZ-based BioVittoria, the world's largest producer and processor of *luo han guo*, gain GRAS (generally recognised as safe) status from the FDA in the USA for its Fruit Sweetness fruit concentrate made with *luo han guo*. This allowed for its wider use in a range of sweetening and flavour enhancing applications including beverages, gum and baked goods.

There is now the potential for a mainstream move for *luo han guo* along the lines of that experienced by stevia, also a natural sweetener, following its GRAS approval in the USA at the end of 2008. Next was its arrival in Europe in 2009, via the Storms drinks range in Switzerland, a country that also saw the first European stevia sweetened food product with the Villers Noir 70% reduced-sugar chocolate bar in early 2010. The EU saw its first products in France in early 2010 with the launch of soft drinks, followed by yoghurts later in the year.

The **Innova Database** records over 150 food and drinks launches in the USA featuring stevia in the first seven months of 2010, most of which were still in the supplements and sweeteners arena. Nearly 40 were in soft drinks, including juices, carbonates and iced teas, and featuring both branded and own-label lines. There were also some notable food launches, including YoCrunch 100 Calorie Packs yoghurts from Breyers, claiming to be the first yoghurts in the country with stevia-based rebiana.

Launches in the EU were much more limited over the same period, reflecting the ongoing regulatory situation, and as in the USA, focused on supplements. **Innova** recorded a number of mainstream food and drinks brands launched in France featuring stevia, however, including 30%-calorie-reduced variants of Fanta Still from Coca-Cola and a range of low-sugar nectars under the Joker Vital Equilibre branding from Eckes-Granini. There was also four fruit yoghurts under Danone's Taillefine wellness branding, claiming to be the first in France to be sweetened with stevia and actually carrying the word stevia in their name – Taillefine a l'extract de Stevia.

"Luo Han Guo, with its natural image and its tradition as a curative product, has made a good start as a sweetener and flavour enhancer in the mainstream food and drinks industry by gaining GRAS status in the USA, and has gained considerable publicity in the industry as a result. Where it has yet to score", according to **Innova Market Insight's Head of Research Lu Ann Williams**, "is in being taken up by the major food and drinks companies and used in their products. Although it does mirror stevia in that it has been allowed in parts of Asia for many years, stevia does have the added advantage of being used in processed foods and drinks in Japan for many years, developing formulations and applications that could then be adapted more easily for the Western market."

For further information on the **Innova Database**, the representative for Australia and New Zealand is Glen Wells ( [Glen.Wells@innova-food.com.au](mailto:Glen.Wells@innova-food.com.au) )