

Sweet alternative making waves in beverage industry

Wilmar is known as a sugar producer, but it has a lot more to offer the food and beverage industry than enticing our collective sweet tooth. **Mike Wheeler** explains.

Sugar and alcohol are two key ingredients for many beverages produced in Australia, and ingredient specialist Wilmar Sugar Australia (Wilmar) is one of the major players in the market.

While sugar is a staple of the company's products, it also has on hand a range of non-sugar sweeteners that are becoming more popular as sectors of the market look to create beverages and food for those who want to decrease their sugar intake.

Wilmar's range includes monk fruit, stevia and erythritol, which are all used in a variety of products. It has also

taken the step to make some of them Australian Certified Organic (ACO), said the company's product manager for specialty ingredients, Anne Price.

The certification is thorough and covers such aspects as the growing and manufacturing/processing of the product.

"The organic process covers the growing of the crop, whether it be the corn for the erythritol, or the stevia or monk fruit plant," said Price. "There are two aspects to the organic side of things. The first is the certificate that covers the growing of the raw material. Then there is the certificate that covers

the manufacturing of the product, which also covers the processing.

"When we get the product to Australia we get it certified with the ACO, who do an overall benchtop audit of the process including the supply chain we use to get it here. Then, they certify it," she said.

Price has noticed the increase in interest in non-sugar sweeteners, mainly from the beverage side of industry, especially in specialty drinks like Kombucha, which is aimed at the health market. And while sugar alternatives are on the upswing, Wilmar at its heart is

a sugar-manufacturing company. Price sees the benefits of both products.

"I think sugar has had an unjustified rap over the past few years," she said. "Sugar is a great natural product but you've got to use it in moderation as part of an overall balanced diet.

"There are a lot of manufacturers who use both sugar and non-sugar sweeteners. The two sales teams within Wilmar are always referring customers to each other, and customers are always making enquiries about both options."

One of the reasons

Australia is a net producer of ethanol, which means a lot is exported.



people look at sugar replacements in their foods is that they are paying more attention to their diet, with a noticeable trend being plant-based food, said Price. And some of those foods need sweeteners, too.

“They are moving into plant-based diets and not necessarily because they are vegetarian, but because they see it as a healthier option and maybe a better option for the environment,” said Price.

The make-up of these sugar alternatives means that they can offer the sweetness but not the calories, which is why some consumers prefer them in the products they buy.

“The monk fruit and stevia have low kilojoule/energy levels so they are providing limited calories to your diet. Because they are intense sweeteners, you use them in very small amounts compared to sugar,” said Price. “Stevia is 300 times sweeter than sugar. Even if they were high-calorie sweeteners, because you use so little of it, you are not providing any extra calories into

Wilmar's Sarina BioEthanol Distillery plant in Queensland.



your diet. They are also different to other high-intensity sweeteners like aspartame, and those chemically produced sweeteners in that they do come from a natural extract.”

Price said most customers, not just the more well-established ones, prefer a natural plant-based product to an artificial manufactured sweetener. Most know what they are looking for, but if you are just starting out, there is help at hand, with advice from the likes of Price as well as third-parties.

“Most manufacturers have knowledge of what they are looking for, but smaller manufacturers tend to use food specialty consultants and those guys know their stuff,” she said. “Most people who are just starting up and need a product like this know a little bit about it and they know what they want to achieve, and what sort of target they are looking for.”

Another product that Wilmar is known for producing is ethanol. It is one of the two major producers in Australia, and Wilmar product manager Scott Johnstone, knows the product inside out.

In Australia, ethanol has two main purposes – as an additive to fuel, or to be used by industry – and Wilmar produces it for both. When it comes to industry supply, the beverage arena is a key market. As well as being used as the alcohol

content in spirits and other drinks, it is also used for refrigeration processes in the wine industry and in the production of flavours and fragrances.

Like other ethanol producers, Wilmar saw a spike in demand as the need for hand sanitiser and hygiene products increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, before that happened there was demand within the beverage industry as boutique distilleries took off.

“The craft and distilling boom that has happened over the past five years means you have a lot of gin and vodka distillers around Australia at the moment,” said Johnstone. “We sell a lot of our ethanol to what I call the pure distillers all around Australia. We also sell a fully organic certified ethanol for those that want to make organic claims for their end products.”

As Australia's largest producer of renewable energy from biomass, Wilmar has a sustainable approach to how it does business. This includes how it produces its ethanol and how it utilises the by-products that come from it.

“We transport sugarcane from the farms to our sugar milling facilities. We produce raw sugar and we take the by-product – molasses – and manufacture ethanol via a fermentation process. The by-product of our ethanol production is returned to farms as liquid fertiliser or

stockfeed thus making this a very closed-loop lifecycle.

“The way we see ourselves in the market is that we have a good quality product. We have very good technical and quality systems in place. We also offer the industry very good technical backup.”

Australia is a net exporter of ethanol, with Wilmar contributing about 60 million litres a year into local and export markets. He said that the industry is growing, and there are new applications for ethanol evolving every year.

“Many of the distillery purists want to make whisky, but in order to be a whisky maker, the product needs to be aged in a barrel for a minimum of two years,” he said. “If you have invested all that cash for two years and you're just waiting for it to come right, and you need a cash source while your whisky develops, then they make gin because you can sell gin straight away. The uniqueness of a sugar- and molasses-based product also appeals to many of these manufacturers.

“It is a great industry to be in. The people are nice and it is a surprisingly open industry with many producers stepping in to help each other out. It is refreshing to see because they all want the industry to succeed. I really like that attitude, and I love meeting people who are passionate about what they do.” **F**