

# Is there something brewing in the world of hibiscus?

What do Odwalla founder Greg Steltenpohl, a fledgling entrepreneur from New Zealand, and a young Mexican-American entrepreneur have in common? Within the last three years, all three men have started up companies hoping to turn the nutritional attributes, the health benefits and the refreshing taste of hibiscus beverages into a viable business proposition.

In some respects, it's not hard to see why an experienced beverage player like Odwalla founder Greg Steltenpohl and other small start-up companies would be turned on by the idea of creating a business around hibiscus beverages. At first sight, the drink is stunning. It's an intense, ruby colour – much like the species of flower from which it comes – *Hibiscus sabdariffa* – and poured into a tall glass, the vibrant liquid screams summer, sun and good times. The flower's Southeast Asian origins connote an air of relaxed, tropical exoticism.

More importantly though, *Hibiscus sabdariffa*, or roselle, as it is known in some parts of the world, also has a long list of attractive characteristics. Recent studies note that the flower is rich in riboflavin, niacin, calcium and iron and

that it contains antioxidants including flavonoids, gossypetine, hibiscetine and sadderetine (1). Rich in anthocyanins and containing more ascorbic acid than oranges and mangoes, brewed hibiscus is already drunk in parts of Africa, Asia, Mexico and the Middle East for its health-giving properties. And in areas of the globe where temperatures can reach 47-48 degrees Celsius, hibiscus tea, prepared both hot and iced, is already well-known and widely consumed as a popular and refreshing alternative to water.

Tim Avila, a leading figure in the nutrition industry and CEO and president of California-based Ventana Health Inc., praises the colour and flavanoid profile of hibiscus, suggesting that the drink produced from this ornamental flower has plenty of factors to make it a commercially viable product for functional beverage formulations. Avila spoke enthusiastically to *New Nutrition Business* about the flower's other attributes too: "It's got a good supply chain, it's a sustainable crop and it's easier to work with than a berry such as noni. Noni has lots of health benefits but its taste is far less appealing. Hibiscus can be concentrated up for pigment levels and anthocyanins, and it's also very light and refreshing."

These factors, combined with the sea change in consumer attitudes towards high-sugar, carbonated beverages add up to some striking reasons for developing a business interest in the brewing of *Hibiscus sabdariffa*.

natural juice company he helped found – to Coca-Cola in 2001, Greg Steltenpohl told the *San Francisco Business Times* that he "saw a chance to make a very viable business with the climate change in the US around



Based on a traditional recipe and sold as a refreshing beverage, Canita Jamaica is one of two flavours of aguas frescas produced and marketed by Eat Inc.

Nutritional Facts	
Datos De Nutrición	
Serving Size/Tamaño por Ración 8 Oz (236 mL)	
Servings per Container / Raciones por Envase 2	
Amount Per Serving/Cantidad por Ración	
Calories / Calorías 135	
% Daily Value* / % Valor Diario*	
Total Fat / Grasa Total	0g 0%
Sodium / Sodio	0g 0%
Total Carb. / Carb. Total	34g 11%
Dietary Fiber	0g 0%
Sugars/ Azúcares	34g
Protein/ Proteínas	0g 0%
Magnesium/ Magnesio	2%
Potassium/ Potasio	2%
Calcium/ Calcio	4%
*percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet	
*Los Porcentajes de Valores Diarios están basados en una dieta de 2,000 calorías	
INGREDIENTS: WATER, HIBISCUS, SUGAR / AGUA, FLOR DE JAMAICA, AZUCAR.	

## BEATING A TRACK TO BEVERAGE SUCCESS

Explaining why he decided to re-enter the beverage business after selling Odwalla – the

distribution of products that have natural, healthy and social dimensions. This is a major market opportunity and it's happening right now."

ADINA WORLD BEAT BEVERAGES	
<b>Hibiscus Lemon Bissap</b>	
Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size: 8floz	
Servings Per Container: 1.75	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories	80
Total Fat	0g
Sodium	15mg
Total Carbs	28g
Sugars	19g
Protein	0g
Vitamin C	4%
Calcium	4%
Iron 2%	
Camu-Camu	50mg
Rosehips (organic)	50mg
Acerola	167mg
Lemon bioflavonoids	83mg
<b>Ingredients</b>	
Purified water	
Hibiscus blossoms	
Organic evaporated cane juice	
Concentrated pineapple juice	
Lemon juice	
Camu-camu	
Organic rosehips	
Acerola	

Steltenpohl is now co-founder of Adina for Life Inc., a company which he and fellow founders Dominique Leveuf (his wife) and Magatte Wade-March established in 2005. Under the moniker Adina World Beat Beverages, they manufacture and market a range of five juices, four of which rely on hibiscus brew or hibiscus blossoms to create a flavour and image that sets them apart from other juices on the market. Last year, Adina World Beat Beverages' four hibiscus-based juice cocktails, which combine hibiscus brews with flavours such as mint, lime, lemon, berry, and pineapple, won the BevNet Best Non-Carbonated Beverage category in *BevNet's Best of 2005*. *BevNet* said: "With a unique new age mission reliant on all-natural ingredients and fair trade farming arrangements, as well as bright, colorful, folksy labels, this product,

if it survives its growing pains, could soon be in the hands of a lot of consumers."

Steltenpohl isn't just banking on the refreshing, good-for-you appeal of the flower-based beverages. He and his co-founders are also keen to demonstrate how their hibiscus-based "coolers" can support communities in the countries where they source their ingredients (their hibiscus, for example, is purchased from small, independent farmers and growers in Senegal). Adina's website proudly states: "The hibiscus in our refreshing Flower-Powered™ coolers is sourced in Senegal through a women's cooperative that works with Agribusiness in Sustainable Natural African Plant Products (ASNAPP). Adina's all-natural ingredients taste so good because they're good for you and all of us who make them."

Adina's president, Wade-Marchand, is a native of Senegal and is also intent on rescuing traditional beverage mixes – such as Jus de Bissap, a hibiscus tea consumed as the national drink in Senegal – from extinction. When she returned to her hometown in Senegal a few years ago, Wade-Marchand was startled by the rapid rate at which traditional drinks "were being replaced by the trendy soft drinks of the western world." Her aim is to halt the "disappearance of...traditional recipes" such as Jus de Bissap, and to "dedicate [the business] to reviving these authentic beverages".

Adina is not the only hibiscus brewer keen to revive the drink and bring it from its traditional African, Mexican and Middle Eastern origins to Western markets unfamiliar with its many attributes. Hibiscus brewing entrepreneurs Jorge Goldsmit (in Chapel Hill, NC, USA) and Richard Lavak (in New Zealand) are both motivated by the promise of hibiscus. Marketing and branding expert Avila says these two hopeful beverage entrepreneurs could find themselves one step ahead of the competition in a beverage market where "everyone" is on the "hunt for the next big thing."

**HIBISCUS FOR HISPANICS: CAPTURING NOSTALGIA AND AUTHENTICITY IN A BOTTLE**

In 2003, Jorge Goldsmit, a native of Mexico City, armed with an MBA from the Kenan-Flagler School of Business at UNC-Chapel

Hill, launched Cañita Aguas Frescas in Jamaica and Tamarindo flavours through his newly established company, Eat Inc.. He explained to *New Nutrition Business* in an email interview that "Cañita is a 100% natural brand of Aguas Frescas – a type of drink from Mexico that includes juices and teas" and that "one of the most popular flavors of beverages in Mexico is Hibiscus Tea, which is called Agua de Jamaica (hibiscus water)." Fluent in both Spanish and English, Goldsmit was careful to point out that, although, in Spanish, hibiscus is called "hibisco", the

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– Tim Avila

*President and CEO, Ventana Life*

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colloquial name is Jamaica flower, hence, Jamaica is the name of his hibiscus drink – made "with real hibiscus flower petals" which are "put in large bags and then brewed and steeped and filled into our bottle".

Aguas Frescas are fresh water drinks imbued with real fruit flavours (the fruits are steeped in water in barrels known as *vitroleros*) and they are consumed by the

barrel-load in Mexico City. Goldsmit was puzzled because despite the large Hispanic population in the States, aguas frescas, brewed the way he remembered from his childhood, was not readily available. He was driven – both by the potential to make a profitable business and by a sense of nostalgia – to bring the authentic “taste, aroma, texture and ingredients” of the Jamaica that his grandmother made when he was a child, to Hispanics across the US.

Goldsmit’s recipe for Cañita (a word which actually means ‘stick’ or ‘reed’ in Spanish) was based on a recipe devised by Goldsmit’s grandmother because Goldsmit wanted his Jamaica to taste as authentic and as Mexican as possible. Consequently, to achieve the authentic taste of traditional Agua de Jamaica, Cañita Jamaica has added sugar – “100% natural granulated sugar”, according to Goldsmit – which sets the sugar count quite high: 34g per 8oz serve, but ensures that the authentic taste of traditional Agua de Jamaica remains.

A recent taste test carried out on Cañita by beverage industry magazine BevNet likened the Jamaica Hibiscus to “a mild grape juice beverage”. It described the juice as having a “very flower-like aroma...with a flavor that is lightly bitter with a sweet finish”. It also has a cloudy, fibrous texture which – to Hispanics with well-trained palates – is a sign of the beverage’s freshness.

While Goldsmit’s intent is to eventually get Hispanic consumers, who are already familiar with the taste of aguas frescas, to “become aware of the health benefits”, first and foremost he is concerned to promote the heritage of his drink and provide his consumers with a bottle of home-brewed nostalgia.

Labeling on the 16oz glass bottles reinforces the product’s Mexican heritage. Agua de Jamaica’s bottles, for example, depict a Mexican beauty surrounded by luscious-looking *hibiscus sabdriffa* shrubs. In her hair is a wonderful specimen of the hibiscus flower and in her arms she holds a large *viterolos* full of hibiscus juice. The bilingual label text also adds to the ‘authenticity’ of the product.

Cañita has a recommended retail price of \$1.49 (€1.18). Currently, the drink sells in over 200 Hispanic markets, natural food stores throughout North Carolina and Atlanta, and says Goldsmit, “is also available through distributors in the

Northeast and the Midwest”. While the entrepreneur has plans to move his drinks to other States throughout the country he admits that “there is still a long way to go.”

## HIBISCUS PRESSÉ: HEALTH FOR A SOUTH PACIFIC MARKET

Richard Lavak, a Canadian born New Zealander with an MBA from New Zealand’s Otago University, was working in Sudan setting up a contract for an international oil consortium when he first tried hibiscus tea – or kakardy as it was known over there. While he’d been drinking water, coke and black tea to keep refreshed, he found that hibiscus drink soon became “the drink [he] reached for first” when he wanted to cool himself in temperatures that sometimes reached 47 to 48 degrees. He remembers a particular drinking occasion when he was on the edge of the Nile, north of Khartoum, in an incredibly intense heat and was offered hibiscus brewed as an iced tea. After that Lavak would ask for kakardy in preference to any other beverage when he needed to refresh himself.

Unlike Goldsmit, who in the US has a ready-made market for his Cañita drinks, Lavak, based in the smaller South Pacific country New Zealand (pop. 4 million) must first educate potential consumers



Richard Lavak, founder of Squish Hibiscus Pressé struggled with New Zealand’s Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries in order to import the hibiscus calyces which were used to brew his hibiscus pressé.



Tim Avila, president and CEO of Ventana Life says “Adina have been very innovative with their taste profiles and their marketing.”

With its light, subtle and colourful characteristics, its nutritional credentials and its potential – in Hispanic, Asian and African markets – to evoke memories of childhood and home, hibiscus may “be like pomegranate waiting to happen...the next big thing in juice”.

But Lavak is also very aware that, before any health claims can be made for hibiscus, there needs to be more evidence. Avila confirms this: “As far as health claims [for hibiscus] are concerned, we need to get growers on-side, they’d need to help fund research, particularly, more human trials, especially into flavanoids.”

While Tim Avila, the beverage specialist who has a comprehensive understanding of biochemistry and bioactive ingredients, can confidently say hibiscus is “fun to work with” because “it makes a good blend” and “because its colour works with fruits and berries of a similar hue, such as pomegranate and acai”, Lavak’s initial experiences working with hibiscus were less than invigorating.

Lavak faced a few hurdles importing the dried hibiscus calyces he sourced from China – the calyces are the part of the flower that contain the plant’s seedpods and they are usually described as “red and fleshy”. In New Zealand, strict agricultural guidelines apply to the importation of plant and animal matter. Lavak had to ensure that the dried calyces (similar to buds) which he sourced for importation were dried, separated and then crushed into smaller leaves and imported as a herbal tea. However, since Lavak has started importing the calyces as a herbal tea, he has brought in 2 tonnes of the leaves and has made 80,000 litres of drink which works out at approximately 25g of calyces per litre.

Lavak’s Hibiscus Pressé’s flavour is often compared with cranberry, but Squish is not as astringent as cranberry, and therefore, it doesn’t have a powdery

after-taste. At a recent Food Fair held in Auckland, one of New Zealand’s largest cities, Lavak dished out around 10000 small samples of the pressé. The feedback was “very, very good,” he said. “Our target market of young women between 18 and 35 was dead on and kids also loved the drink. We probably had four kids out of all the kids we had who didn’t like the drink...I was really amazed with that”.

Right now, as far as uptake of his product goes, Lavak is in a similar space to Goldsmit. While the hibiscus products from both Squish and Eat Inc. have been praised for their taste profiles (and for their attractiveness), as Lavak says, “the biggest problem is getting people to distribute it, it’s a catch 22, they don’t want to distribute it unless they’re going to make a lot of money out of it and it’s going to be popular” and really, he continues, “it’s a boutique drink, it’s not going to be a mainstream drink”.

Whatever the case, the future of hibiscus beverages will be an interesting one to watch. With its light, subtle and colourful characteristics, its nutritional credentials and its potential – in Hispanic, Asian and African markets – to evoke memories of childhood and home, hibiscus may, as Tim Avila predicts, “be like pomegranate waiting to happen...the next big thing in juice”.

about the drinking delights and good-for-you characteristics of his hibiscus pressé, Squish.

To this end, Lavak has set up a website [www.squishdrinks.co.nz](http://www.squishdrinks.co.nz) through which he communicates the drink’s taste profile – “a unique exotic floral fruity flavour” – and the beneficial properties of Squish Hibiscus Pressé.

Taking a different approach to Eat Inc., and to Adina World Beat Beverages, the Squish website highlights *Hibiscus sabdariffa*’s high antioxidant levels, its “red anthocyanin pigments” and the presence of flavanoids, gossypectine, sabdretine and hibiscetine. The label on the 375ml plastic bottle also reaches out to consumers, informing them about hibiscus’s popularity in “folklore and folk medicine in the Caribbean, China, Egypt, Sudan, and Asia”. It also advises consumers that “Hibiscus is stimulating scientific inquiry into possible health benefits and its antioxidant properties.”

1. S.B. Fasoyiro, O.A. Ashaye, A. Adeola and F.O. Samuel. “Chemical and Storbility of Fruit-Flavoured (*Hibiscus sabdariffa*) Drinks”. *World Journal of Agricultural Sciences 1 (2): 165-168, 2005.*

SQUISH HIBISCUS PRESSÉ		
Nutrition Information		
Servings Per Package: 1		
Serving Size: 375ml		
	Average Quantity Per Serving	Average Quantity Per 100ml
ENERGY	517kj (124Cal)	138kj (33Cal)
PROTEIN	LESS THAN 1g	LESS THAN 1g
FAT – Total	LESS THAN 1g	LESS THAN 1g
- Saturated	LESS THAN 1g	LESS THAN 1g
CARBOHYDRATE	28.9g	7.7g
- Sugars	28.9g	7.7g
SODIUM	11mg	LESS THAN 5mg
INGREDIENTS		
Hibiscus extract (water, hibiscus sabdariffa), fructose, ascorbic acid.		