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Super Fruit

Antioxidant-rich acai berry is newest trendy ingredient

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Staff Photo: Jason Braverman



Special Photo

Acai berries are dark purple — almost black — with a watered-down chocolatey taste. The fruit also weighs in with hefty levels of fiber, amino acids, phytonutrients and essential fatty acids, all of which aid in healthy hair and skin, joint health and digestive health.

Deep under the canopy of the Brazilian Amazon lies a hidden wonder fruit. Within the skin of the acai are promises to rejuvenate, revive and restore aching bodies.

But before extracting the benefit of the minuscule berry, you must first learn to pronounce it. A-see-ah? Nope. A-ky? Not even close. Try this: ah-sigh-eee.

"There's no chance of getting it right the first time. It took me about six months to learn how to say it correctly," said Jeff Graham, managing director of product development for Mona Vie, an acai-based health drink.

Harvested from a palm tree, the berry is dark purple - almost black - with a watered-down chocolatey taste. Although it has a very short shelf life, about one to two days, it can be freeze-dried in a powder form to make it accessible, but still retain nutrients.

"That has been one of the biggest challenges," Graham said. "We had the idea of using the berry several years ago, but had to figure out how we could get it from the Amazon back here."

It has been eaten by native Brazilians for centuries, but it wasn't until about two years ago that the acai berry was brought to worldwide markets. In the last year or so, acai has gained popularity in a range of edibles, and is featured in everything from the Mona Vie juices and smoothies to sport gel, chewable tablets and even sorbets, such as Sambazon's new organic acai sorbet line.

Dr. Nicholas Perricone, a pal of talk-show tycoon Oprah, recently touted the berry as his No. 1 choice for a superfood, thus catapulting the berry into a whirlwind of public acclaim.

What is it about this tiny berry that has the health world buzzing? For starters, the berry is packed with antioxidants, Graham said. Acai berries have 167 antioxidants inside their little casing, outdoing pomegranates (with 105) and blueberries (with 61). A recent study at the University of Florida concluded that the berry contains antioxidants that destroyed cultured human cancer cells.

The fruit also weighs in with hefty levels of fiber, amino acids, phytonutrients and essential fatty acids, all of which aid in healthy hair and skin, joint health and digestive health. This, Perricone

states on Oprah's Web site, makes it one of the most nutritious and powerful foods in the world.

Near daily, Graham said he receives feedback from Mona Vie drinkers, declaring the difference they have felt in their lives. Clients report increased energy, steadier blood sugar levels and, basically, say they just feel better.

"It's truly a remarkable food," Graham said. "It's a powerhouse of nutrition."

However, Michael Stafford, a nutritionist with Emory Eastside Medical Center, notes that the berry is very new in the medical world. While it may hold the promise of greatness, it still needs more time to be tested.

"We don't know exactly what it does or doesn't do," Stafford said. "It is a fruit that is very high in antioxidants, but it still needs more research. I would always recommend eating whole fruits and vegetable over juices and supplements, which is how this berry is mostly found. With the health claims, they are just that, claims. It needs to be further studied for benefits, dosage and safety."

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