

Educating by elixir

[Ryan Doran](#) | Apr 01, 2011 | [Comments 0](#)



Renato and Meghan Varas, owners and founders of Simply Originals.

In Rowayton, Simply Originals has built its traditional beverage business into an expanding line of refreshing drinks.

The company was founded in 2008 by husband and wife, Renato and Meghan Varas. The beverages, based on Renato's traditional Peruvian family recipes, have grown in popularity on the shelves of Whole Foods markets for the past three years, but sales are still contingent on the public's awareness.

"We're very happy to have been able to find we have that kind of staying power," said Renato. "There have been many beverages that started at Whole Foods around the same time as we did that aren't around anymore. The beverage space is not an easy one to compete in; it is an uphill battle when you are competing with brands that have 10 skews."

While there are many players, he said, the market for specialty drinks continues to grow. "We have found we still have a very unique and desired product," he said. "We are happy not to get lost in the many types of iced teas, which seem to come out on a daily basis. Part of the thorn to that is that we need to teach people about our product."

The two original beverages, chicha morada and flaxseed, have been joined by flaxseed green tea and flaxseed green tea mandarin.

"There's definitely (a) strategy behind our flavor decisions," said Meghan. "The American consumer is well versed in green tea. When you're competing with large beverage brands in a very focal market like Whole Foods, every day you are fighting for shelf space and exposure. Two more flavors are two more skews for our product to show."

Renato said the drinks appeal to the health-conscious market where vitamin and antioxidant content is important. Chicha morada, the purple Peruvian corn, itself has 1.5 times more antioxidants than the acai berry, according to clinical research studies from Ohio State University.

"We find that people who know what these content levels mean, see it and realize how great a benefit it is," Renato said.

Meghan explained why they chose to incorporate a green tea product. "We teamed our green tea with our flaxseed brand because those are the ones with the greatest common exposure," she said. "Flaxseed is in cereal, bars and creams. Its health benefits are well documented. With the chicha morada there's more education involved."

Simply Originals also chose to change the name to chicha morada, from purple corn, because they were finding a negative stigma associated with corn syrup.

"This is the national drink of Peru," said Renato. "This is what 30 million people drink every day and what the Incan natives have been drinking for centuries. Peru is very hot right now for tourism and cuisine, we hope that will help with the exposure of chicha."

Simply Originals is in 22 Whole Foods in the grocer's northeastern region.

"We have been approved for the rest of the country, but have declined the offer so far," said Meghan.

Renato said Simply Originals prefers to build the brand first.

"We know we will do well in places out West, especially California," said Renato. "But there is still a lot of education that needs to go on and to succeed that would require us to have a presence there."

Simply Originals distributes its products through United Natural Brands Inc., an independent national distributor of natural, organic and specialty foods based in Providence, R.I.

He said there will be a fifth flavor out under the Simply Originals brand this year.

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