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Fruit drinks put the squeeze on health benefits in the produce department

By Elizabeth Ashby
Special to The Packer

Recently, fruit juice has earned a spot in the produce department thanks to its high concentrations of healthful properties.

One of the most recent newcomers to the category is juice made from the acai berry grown on the coast of the Amazon River in Brazil.

Jeremy Black, vice president of marketing for Sambazon Inc., San Clemente, Calif., said consumers want more for their money in to-

day's economy and fruit juices offer health properties to meet that need.

"The dark berry juices like ours with acai, blueberries, etc. — whether it is Naked Juice, Odwalla, Bolthouse, Sambazon — any SKUs focusing on antioxidant-rich berries are performing well," he said.

Elizabeth Lombardi, marketing director of Sambazon, said the company is the largest acai producer, with growth of 146% versus last year and sales of \$8.1 million during the past 52-week timeframe.

"The interesting thing to note is



► Acai berries have become a popular juice ingredient.

that three years ago acai didn't really exist in the grocery store. There weren't any offerings from major players. Today, if you look at us, Bom Dia and Bossanova, it has become a premium part of juice with volume at least 15% of the

juice category," Black said.

Adriana Kahane, founder and president of Dream Foods International, Santa Monica, Calif., agrees that consumers are looking for ways to get healthful properties naturally rather than through artificial energy drinks.

The company's blood orange juice, produced from blood oranges grown in the Mount Etna region of Sicily, is high in antioxidants and high in vitamin C. The latter is a nutrient not found in fruits such as pomegranates or acai, she said.

"It has some really amazing health properties, like all red pigmented fruits," she said.

"Something like a pomegranate and an acai berry don't have vitamin C. Antioxidants help absorb vitamin C, so taking them at the same time is good."

Juice producers also say freshness — a term which in itself sparks debate — is key to appealing to health-conscious consumers.

Marygrace Sexton, chief executive officer of Natalie's Orchard Island Juice Co., Fort Pierce, Fla.,

said the company's fresh-squeezed juice is only pasteurized for six seconds so it still maintains some enzymatic activity, thus catering to those who care about the nutritional value of the juice.

Kim Larson, vice president of marketing for Jamba Juice, Emeryville, Calif., said fresh squeezed juice is costly and difficult for mass marketers, but she is seeing more mainstream retailers enter the arena because they are mindful of the quality, value and health benefits of fresh juices.