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Slideshow: Healthy beverage innovation at Expo East

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BALTIMORE — The tradeshow floor at Natural Products Expo East was flooded with new twists on H₂O. Brands at the event, held Sept. 16-19 in Baltimore, showcased such concepts as banana water, watermelon water, maple water, hemp-infused water, flower-infused water and fat-infused water. Yes, Fat Water from Bulletproof Nutrition, Bellevue, Wash., blends water with medium-chain triglycerides oil, which is said to provide sustained energy.

Many other exhibitors displayed cold-pressed juices, wellness teas, kombuchas, elixirs, tonics and organic energy beverages, each touting natural sweeteners and functional benefits.

What's driving the trend toward healthier hydration? Changing consumer preferences, for one, are shaking up the beverage category, said Jeffrey Klineman, editor in chief of BevNet.com, during a panel discussion at Expo East.

"The growth of products like Sparkling Ice and LaCroix and other sparkling waters is indicative of the fact people want these zero-added sugar products, but they want flavor, and they also want something a little different from water," Mr. Klineman said. "Now there's also this functional food trend. People want to treat their beverages and foods as a fuel source ... I think it's a millennial approach."

Another driving force behind recent beverage category innovation is the Food and Drug Administration's proposed changes to the Nutrition Facts Panel, which would require brands to list the amount of added sugars in a product. Additionally, the F.D.A. is recommending serving sizes listed on packages more accurately reflect the portions consumers eat or drink in one sitting. This may be a turning point for traditional beverage brands, said Justin Prochnow, a shareholder of Greenberg Traurig, L.L.P., who discussed the impact of such regulations during the presentation.

"Having to disclose the calories for your whole 20-oz or 24-oz product on your label in one serving as opposed to showing it for 8-oz and making it three servings is going to affect the numbers a lot and make those calories and the added sugars look a lot bigger than they do now," Mr. Prochnow said. "That, I think, will affect the formulation of products. (Manufacturers) can't afford to have 460 calories on the label. No one's going to buy that, and we're going to have to look at different alternatives."

One such alternative is Forager, a brand of organic high-pressure processed juices and nut milks. John-Charles Hanley, co-founder and chief operating officer of San Francisco-based Forager Project, discussed the brand's philosophy during the presentation. He founded the company with his stepfather, Stephen Williamson, former chief executive of the juice brand Odwalla.

"We actually put our ingredients on the front of our panel, which is a pretty different approach than a lot of beverage companies out there," Mr. Hanley said. "The No. 1 ingredient in our juices is always a vegetable. We're really focused on reducing people's consumption of sugar."

This approach to formulation and transparency may be indicative of the future of the beverage market, Mr. Klineman said.

"The sweetness profile of the products is much lower; the transparency of ingredients is much higher," he said. "It's going to be interesting because if you see a wave of consumers flock toward Forager ... I think you're going to see major effects on product development (in the category)."

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