

# Sweet talk

Veer Arjun Singh on why shorter, sharper nutrition labels — the kind that skip a few ingredients such as sugar by many other names — are starting to make business sense

There's apple juice concentrate in muesli, malt extracts in whole wheat cereal, and maltitol and maltodextrin in digestive ragi biscuits. The problem is not that sneaky sugar has found its way into daily consumables through obfuscation again. It's the fact that these products scream "zero added sugar" from supermarket shelves to be then picked up by health-conscious idealists who have bought into the illusion of a sugar-free diet.

Identifying the sugar and artificial sweeteners hiding behind chemical names is a long-standing battle around the world. But what we are dealing with here is of a more primitive nature. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has finally expressed concern about why Indian *namkeen* and *mithai* don't have nutrition labels. The food safety body is holding discussions with sweet-makers about a new logo for products that have less sugar, salt and saturated fat and are made with natural ingredients. What has been reluctantly agreed upon so far is that these packaged Indian treats will display a manufacturing date and a best before date on their products from June 1. It's a far cry from finally knowing how much sugar goes into that *gulab jamun* that you send so blithely down the chute. But it's a healthy start.

The lack of transparency in labelling is not unique to *desi* Indian sweet-makers or American multinationals. Chef Sanjeev Kapoor tells me about a popular bakery in Australia whose "freshly baked bread" sold like hot cakes, until it was discovered that the frozen dough was being imported from Germany. Legally, the company wasn't obliged to mention it. But the new improved customer awareness rightly turned it into a scandal.

"Well, 97 per cent fat free means three per cent fat. Many products that say 'zero cholesterol' on their packets were not supposed to have cholesterol in the first place," says Kapoor. Now that the world has latched on to a few bad words, the hard-won awareness about salt, sugar, cholesterol and saturated fat in packaged food is often being used against customers.

It's an unsavoury cocktail of misleading claims and lack of understanding of nutrition. The people who abstain from added table sug-

ar often consume it unintentionally or turn to chemically produced sugar-free alternatives. And there's a conflicting body of evidence about the risks of drinking "zero sugar" beverages, which are loaded with acesulfame potassium and aspartame disguised as "sweeteners 951 and 950", respectively.

As Kapoor says, in the hierarchy of preference, buying decisions have always been led by taste, followed by value and then health. Perhaps it is the reason why people rarely question "100 per cent" fruit juice that costs a modest ₹20 and tastes consistently sweet. The juice is made from concentrate, is pasteurised and often topped up with sweeteners and flavour enhancers, such as malic acid.

American nutritionist, fitness coach and author J J Virgin has made a business of identifying these sneaky sugars. Her verbose, officious but useful book, *The Sugar Impact Diet*, lists these sugars and sweeteners in lengthy tables. She argues that the secret behind shedding weight and inches — and keeping them off — is nothing but a game of avoiding the empty calories called refined sugar.



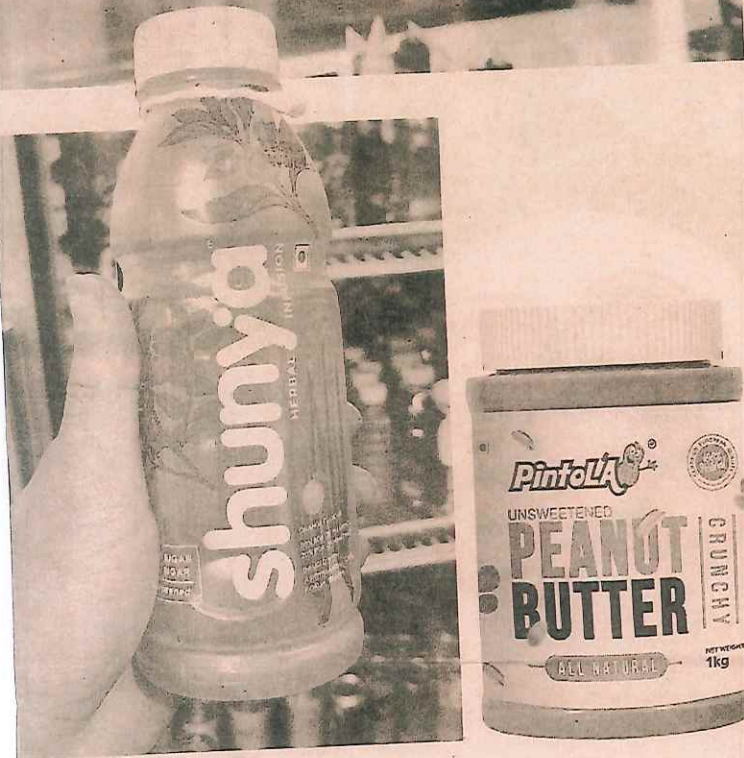
**'HEALTH IS NOT ABOUT ONE INGREDIENT. SOMETHING FREE OF SUGAR MAY BE HIGH IN FAT OR SODIUM'**

**SANJEEV KAPOOR**  
Chef and author

Amid the confusion caused by the rise of lifestyle diseases, some solutions are being offered in the form of more widely understood labels. Raw Pressery from Rakyam Beverages is leading the cold-pressed juice revolution in India. The labels on their juices claim that they have no added sugar, salt or preservatives and are not made from concentrate. The transparent packaging helps too. The ingredient of Valencia Orange juice, for instance, is "100 per cent Valencia orange". It's not the same as juice squeezed freshly at home, but compared with the sugar-laced fruit juices in tetra packs, it's refreshingly honest.

"High pressure bottling reduces the microbial load and does not require us to use preservatives," says Sreejit Nair, a former PepsiCo employee who is now the chief growth officer at Raw Pressery. He says that while "no sugar" is one of the key selling points, the company relies on honest labelling and packaging to attract customers who are willing to pay a premium for a good product. Their range of almond milk, for instance, uses maple syrup, which is often used as a sneaky sugar in liquids, but mentions it on the front of the package. "It's not like adding apple juice to the very bitter cranberry juice. We are upfront about our

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ingredients," says Nair. Raw Pressery juices are sold in supermarkets, airports and flights and also Subway outlets and Cult gyms.

Health drinks are such big business that even the century-old Baidyanath Group, makers of chyawanprash and ayurvedic medicines, have dived into it. Their new venture, Shunya, makes a range of "no sugar, artificial sweeteners or preservatives" drinks, with herbal infusions such as *ashwagandha*, *brahmi*, *khus* and *kokum*.

Bread spreads are also helping lead the push for cleaner labels. Since "good fats" are now a widely accepted fact, peanut and almond butter are in vogue. New brands, such as Pintola, have eliminated sugar, salt and preservatives from the butters.

"Was it always possible to make juices and spreads without sugar, salt and food additives? Of course it was. Brands are now responding to a market trend that followed awareness," says nutritionist and diabetes educator Sheryl Salis, who is also a part of FSSAI's Eat Right Campaign, which is about educating people to make healthier food choices.

"Even without added sugar, juices are generally high in natural sugar. The problem is that when they are marketed as healthy, people consume them in excess. And that's bad," says Salis. The 250ml Valencia Orange juice from Raw Pressery, priced at ₹100, has 27 gm of naturally occurring sugar.

Big brands are responding to the trend, too. But there's little headway. The headlines that followed Coca-Cola CEO James Quincey's India visit was around how India will soon be the global beverage giant's third-largest market. But, T Krishnakumar, president, Coca-Cola India, also said that the company is looking to reduce the sugar in their drinks to "below six grams in the next 3-4 years". A 330ml coke can currently has about 36 grams of sugar.

Nestlé, too, is committed to reduce sugar, sodium and saturated fat in its products. But its valiant effort in the form of Milkybar Wowsomes, which cuts the sugar in the chocolate by a third, was axed in less than two years of its launch in the UK owing to poor demand.

We have a few sugar-free alternatives, but maybe it's not the time for chocolates to rid themselves of sugar. "Health is not about one ingredient. Something free of sugar may be high in fat or sodium," points out chef Kapoor.

Sometimes it's just about reading the label right. Read the ingredients and not just the nutrition table. The word "added" should set off alarm bells. Remember that 20gm of sugar is five tablespoons of it. Ingredients are listed in order of their decreasing quantity, and sugar and sweeteners have many monikers. When you know your sugars, you'll know what to do when you spot high-fructose corn syrup in ingredients despite what the packet says.