

Brazilian acai berries pack a punch

Brazilian acai berries: For the wine lovers among us who want to enjoy a glass of something full-bodied and aromatic – without the alcohol – there is a solution.



Berry good: Brazilian acai berries Photo: ALAMY
By Rose Prince 9:00AM BST 25 Jun 2010

Two years ago I made it a rule that I would not drink wine between Sunday evening and Thursday lunchtime. It was necessary because it appears that I am no exception to the rule that women eventually lose their tolerance for wine – and that drinking it doesn't half pile the weight on. Of course it's a rule that is meant to be broken and I do fall off the wagon frequently, usually with quite feeble excuses.

I like to think this weakness has nothing to do with a craving for alcohol, but a craving for wine. Not just its taste, but the colour, scent and to a great extent its texture. Strange to think that a drink can have texture, but substitutes for wine frequently fail to be satisfying because they lack body.

The weight of a drink governs how you drink it. Lightweight drinks with little body are those we glug while weightier, full-bodied drinks are sipped.

My grandmother, who had a healthy enthusiasm for wine, went further than this and claimed that water was actually dangerous. "You are far more likely to choke on water than wine,"

she said. She also described lettuce as a “killer” that could easily get stuck in the throat. Gourmands, you would have adored this woman.

But I can no longer use the texture excuse when reaching for an icy Gascony white on a Wednesday. Former bar-owner Peter Spanton, now a teacher and a non-drinker, has made a drink that satisfies on this level – and others, too. His invention, Beverage No 7, is a blend of wild Brazilian acai (pronounced ass-eye), grape juice and “assorted spices”.

This is a drink with a velvet texture, a balanced, dry fruitiness and long flavour. Remind you of anything? Yes! It is those drinks we have always liked and will always like, such as wine, Guinness and even Coca Cola.

Spanton began his research with a trip to the shops. “I bought every soft drink I could find,” he says. “Squashes, cordials, fizzy drinks, fruit juices. I put the whole lot on the dining room table and tasted the lot.” As he tasted, Spanton removed drinks from the table that did not measure up. “In the end, there were two drinks left: Coca Cola and Indian tonic water.”

Struck by the fact that these two drinks were originally taken for their medicinal qualities – Coke as a pick me up (the original contained cocaine) and tonic water to fight malaria – Spanton began to search for therapeutic drink ingredients. “I read about acai in 2003. It is big in Brazil, where they believe it is great for skin and libido.”

Acai berries have a high antioxidant content, said to help prevent disease. “If you believe in all that,” Spanton says. In spite of following the medicinal route, he has no intention of this being a selling point. “The bottle does not say it is good for you. I couldn’t bear the idea that it would be seen as a ‘health drink’. It’s for adults,” he adds.

Coca Cola, which contains enough lemony flavoured phosphoric acid to counter the sugar content, is a drink I hate to love – for health reasons. But Beverage No 7 is doubtless good for you. Made for Spanton by expert juice blenders David Berryman, it contains no sugar or artificial additives and, at 55 per cent, a heap of acai. Pectin, a natural gelling agent, gives the drink its lovely weighty body.

Word about No 7 is travelling fast. Orders are coming in, as well as a fair few reorders. But Spanton’s mission is not quite over. No 9, made with sour cherry, is on the way. But his first ambition, to make a drink for non-drinkers, is fulfilled. “I wanted something you could sip, not gulp,” he says. “Something with character, something deeper.” Well, as a somewhat schizoid drinker looking for satisfaction, I’ll have what he’s having.