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Drinks that sound like drugs

Energy beverages mix hard-core images with healthful twist

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Tim McCullen drinks his morning pick-me-up at 3 p.m. Instead of black coffee, McCullen, who tends bar at The Goat in Raleigh, downs a couple of effect brand energy drinks when he reports for a shift that doesn't end till the wee hours.

McCullen, 29, said this somewhat sheepishly. He answered "unfortunately" when first asked if he drinks energy beverages, and wondered whether all that caffeine and whatnot packed into them is healthy.

"Really," he asked, "what is taurine?"

That's a good question when the one-upmanship in the energy-drink business has spawned a product named Cocaine and a new brand of coffee bean called Meth Coffee. Energy drinks are filled with ingredients such as taurine and L-carnitine and D-ribose, the kind of substances most need Google to decipher. Outside the energy derived from caffeine -- an 8.4-ounce can of Cocaine contains 280 milligrams of caffeine, while a cup of coffee might have 80 to 100 milligrams -- the people drinking them don't know much about how these beverages affect their bodies.

As it turns out, the scientists don't have all the answers, either.

Taurine, if you were wondering, is a nonessential amino acid purported to boost energy. Given the Latin root taurus, you could say that taurine put the bull in Red Bull, the company that introduced U.S. consumers to energy drinks. Many energy beverages include taurine in their formulas.

"We don't really have any sense of how it affects humans," said Barry Popkin, a nutrition professor and director of the interdisciplinary obesity program at UNC-Chapel Hill. "We know taurine is good for cats. That's all we know."

But the information is good enough for drink makers. Popkin, who has studied Americans' beverage consumption, said manufacturers will add "anything that some health-food addict or another thinks is healthy."

Look on the Internet and "you'll find somebody saying something good about them," he said.



Energy drink marketers hope the names, from left, Red Bull, Monster Energy, Cocaine and Amp give potential buyers the idea that they will get more than a little pick-me-up.

Staff Photos by Juli Leonard

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"But we have no evidence that they do anything good."

What's in a name?

The lack of scientific research hasn't stopped companies from pumping out new energy products. Jamey Kirby of San Diego is behind Cocaine, an energy drink that made its debut in September. Kirby, 42, hails from Roxboro and got into the energy business after selling his interest in a software company.

"I thought it would be fun," he said, "especially to do something like this."

Like what?

"Create a controversial product and watch the politicians and people get their panties in a knot."

That's exactly what happened. This month the Food and Drug Administration sent a letter to Cocaine's parent company, Redux Beverages LLC, accusing it of illegally marketing the product. The agency was upset about Cocaine's tagline, "The Legal Alternative," and accused Redux of marketing the drink as a "street-drug alternative" and not a dietary supplement.

The company says it didn't intend to market the drink as if it would cause a high like the drug cocaine.

"The intention was, here's an alternative way to be cool, without having to resort to illicit drugs," Kirby said. "One lady wrote me this letter -- 'How dare you insinuate that drugs are cool?' And I'm like, I didn't make it that way. Why do you think kids do it? They don't do it because it's uncool."

That is exactly the idea behind the marketing of products such as Meth Coffee, which boasts that it "wakes zombies" and "straightens drunks." Advertising like this will always be effective in luring customers of the young-adult variety, who enjoy irritating those who make the rules.

For his part, Kirby brushed aside the idea that Cocaine might be unhealthy.

"It's the healthiest energy drink on the market," he said. "If you go to a nutritionist and have him review the things that are in our drink, our drink is very healthy."

How much?

We already know what Popkin thinks about taurine. Here's what he had to say about a drink that contains 280 milligrams of caffeine:

"If you drink several of these really fast, you get so much caffeine that it puts an overload on your heart."

McCullen is familiar with the feeling. When he's not working, he's partial to Amp, a Mountain Dew-branded energy drink. He tends to go for the 24-ounce "Big Rig" cans.

"I'm a huge caffeine junkie," he says.

McCullen once drank so much that he could feel his heart racing, and he ended up pacing around the house for 45 minutes to expend some energy.

New cans of Cocaine will come with an advisory to drink only two during a 24-hour period. "One in the morning, and you're good for the whole day," Kirby said.

As far as the controversy over Cocaine, it's exactly what he was hoping for.

"We're in America. I can call my drink anything I want."

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