

Gin and Health Tonic

By Reg P. Wydeven
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My favorite singer of all time is easily Frank Sinatra. “The Voice,” as he was known early in his career, sang using real emotion, as though the lyrics were the prose of his life and not just words on a page.

But Sinatra was also known as “The Chairman of the Board,” the leader of the Rat Pack and the epitome of cool. He had certain rules to live by: always cock your hat – angles are attitudes; never wear tuxedos on Sunday; don’t be caught wearing brown shoes after dark.

Old Blue Eyes was always quick to impart words of wisdom. Most of them were about the mainstays of his life: music, fashion, women and, of course, booze. Some of my favorites are, “I feel sorry for people who don’t drink. When they wake up in the morning, that’s as good as they’re going to feel all day.” And his classic, “alcohol may be man’s worst enemy, but the bible says love your enemy.”

Well, according to some alcoholic beverage manufacturers, man’s worst enemy may now not be so bad. The newest trend in the spirit world is “healthy” alcohol. Taking a cue from the billion-dollar “enhanced water” industry, liquor makers are now improving their products by fortifying them with vitamins, minerals, and other natural ingredients.

“Botanical” drinks are a relatively new phenomenon. In 2007, eight new alcoholic beverages with organic claims were introduced into the market. From January of 2008 through October of 2009, however, 84 new drinks emerged. For example, Square One botanical is a 90-proof organic rye infused with eight organic botanicals, including chamomile and citrus peel, and is marketed as a “progressive organic spirit.” Vodkas are incorporating taurine, an amino-acid metabolism-booster, while other companies are adding antioxidant-rich açai. Rums are being improved with the South American guarana berry, which is an herbal, non-sugar-packed stimulant similar to Red Bull. Finally, Stampede Light Plus beer is packed with B vitamins.

The difficulty is that the manufacturers of these organically-imbued drinks they want you to imbibe imply that their enhancements make their drinks better for you than their unenhanced rivals. However, the Alcohol and Tobacco Trade and Tax Bureau, the federal agency that regulates alcohol, strictly prohibits manufacturers from making health claims about their products.

Proponents of these new and improved libations love to cite a 2007 study in the *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture*, which found that alcohol boosts the antioxidant capacity of fruits like strawberries and blackberries. The United States Department of Agriculture’s Agriculture Research Service, which helped prepare the report, cautions that the study merely measured the level of antioxidants in the berries, and that the berries were not consumed by humans. The purpose of the study was to test the killing of microbial growth on fruit, and the resulting increase in antioxidant levels was merely a side effect.

Critics claim the manufacturers are using marketing buzz words like “organic,” “natural” and “botanical” to trick consumers into believing the drinks are healthy. Dr. R. Curtis Ellison, a professor of medicine at Boston University, claims that drinking alcohol in order to get nutrients is problematic. He compares alcohol enhancements to “putting vitamins in cigarettes.”

One thing is for sure that if people consume enhanced alcohol for solely its nutritional value, they should heed Sinatra’s soundest advice: “You only live once – and the way I live, once is enough.”