

May 28, 2008

Meet the fizz maker

A Sioux Falls native produces effervescence - including new help for drinkers

Jay Kirschenmann

jkirsch@argusleader.com

Former Sioux Falls resident Fred Wehling is in the business of bubbles.

His Plymouth, Minn., company, Amerilab Technologies Inc., draws on Wehling's authority on all things effervescent - products that get into your system through bubbles.

Wehling, who graduated from O'Gorman High School in 1973 and South Dakota State University in 1977, holds several patents on how to make medicines and get them inside people using effervescent means. He also holds patents in drug/application methods, both effervescent and those that dissolve in your mouth or under your tongue.

But these days, his two biggest projects are bubbling up onto store shelves across the nation and overseas: a revival of a 1950s-'60s kid-focused flavor drink called Fizzies, and "Drinkin' Mate," a hangover defense.

Wehling, who majored in chemistry and biology in college, went on to work for Upsher-Smith Laboratories Inc. in Plymouth. There, he was responsible for setting up the regulatory functions for the company to comply with FDA regulations. He soon became director of manufacturing.

In 1995, he and a friend, Bruce Paddock, started their own company, Amerilab Technologies, making over-the-counter products. They also worked toward creating their own effervescent products. His company also was contracted to make Airborne, the product a schoolteacher and her husband invented to purportedly boost immunity.

Airborne's inventors in March settled a class-action lawsuit that alleged false advertising for the herbal supplement firm. But it's still in business, just more carefully wording its advertisements.

Embarking on a different project, Wehling took on production for a company that revived the old bubbly, flavor drink Fizzies.

"But they almost sunk us," he said on a recent visit home in Sioux Falls. "They went out of business and stuck us for about \$1.8 million in raw material contracts and unpaid bills. Our company went from 65 to seven people within two months."

Wehling and Paddock nearly closed their doors, but at Wehling's urging, they bought the rights to Fizzies and began marketing the product themselves. The tablets, which dissolve in water to make a flavored beverage, come in cherry, lemon lime, root beer, fruit punch, blue razz, orange and sour apple.

"I decided we were going to do it the right way, roll it out slowly, finance it well, put some good packaging behind it, and so far so good," he said. "Now it's in thousands of candy stores all over the United States, in Cracker Barrel restaurant gift shops and on Amazon.com."

Drinkin' Mate born

Wehling often does business in China, but he says that means you go out to dinner and end up drinking and doing karaoke until 3 a.m. After many nights, most people suffer from hangovers. A great night often leads to a lousy next day, he says.

Drinking alcohol, even in moderate amounts, leads to dehydration and unbalanced levels of acid and sugar in your body, Wehling said. His friend and associate in China Dr. Ge Ming Lui, a cell biologist, knew of a folk remedy that is supposed to ease headaches and cleanse toxins.

As a demonstration, his friend threw guava leaves into a blender, produced a green sludge and asked Wehling to drink it. The two then spent a night on the town drinking and felt surprisingly good the next day.

He's careful with the product claims. The package says "... not evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to treat, cure or prevent any disease."

But his own tests show it can help most people with their hangovers.

"We found that it works for eight out of 10 people," Wehling said. "You may not have absolutely no hangover - maybe still a little thirsty and have a small headache - but that's it."

It's now in many Lewis Drug Stores locally, some bars, Hy-Vee stores and recently was accepted by the SuperValu food chain, where it will be in 2,500 stores by October. The product doesn't need FDA approval, Wehling said.

At Lewis stores, the product is stocked in the checkout area and the beer department. "I have not personally tried it, but I have talked to people who have used it, and they said it seemed to help," said Troy Claussen, Lewis Drug spokesman.

The FDA does not regulate or approve such remedies before they're on the shelf because a "hangover" is not a health condition, said Dr. David Katz, director of the Prevention Research Center at Yale University School of Medicine.

Claiming a product relieves hangover symptoms is like saying a product will "help you feel great," Katz said Tuesday. That is not a health claim and thus is outside the bounds of specific FDA constraints, he said.

"If and when we understand the mechanism of migraine, a claim about a product addressing some particular mechanistic pathway would likely be subject to FDA oversight," he said.

But does Drinkin' Mate work?

"I invited one of my staff members to try it out, which he did and said it worked great," Katz said. "I am intrigued and might want to design a study but haven't done so yet."

The recommended daily serving of the product has not been established, according to the package. So, how much Drinkin' Mate or guava leaf would be too much for a person?

"The answer is that we won't know until or unless something bad happens," Katz said. "So, in general, best to be skeptical - not closed-minded, but cautious."

Meanwhile, orders for Drinkin' Mate are pouring in at Wehling's nearly 200,000-square-foot manufacturing plant, he said. Smaller orders are made in his 50,000-square-foot plant in Las Vegas.

He and his partner grow the guava leaves on land they own around fish ponds in China.

"It's organic - grown with no fertilizers or pesticides," he said. "We have total control, know how much we can grow, and process it right there. That's as well as you can control a natural product."

His company will sell \$50 million in Drinkin' Mate this year and hopes to double that during the next three years, he said. Overseas prospects, especially in Russia, look good, too, he said.

"We're hoping that Drinkin' Mate will become like aspirin, something you have around in the medicine cabinet just in case," Wehling said.

Reach Jay Kirschenmann at 331-2312.
