



# Hitting the sweet spot with reduced-sugar chocolate beverages

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Taste, long the arbiter of success in the beverage aisle, shows no sign of acquiescing its reign as the leading driver of purchase decisions. While consumers remain unyielding in this regard, there's plenty of evidence that sugar is also on their minds.

For many chocolate beverages, this duality presents a challenge. Nothing signals over-the-top indulgence like rich, chocolatey flavors...but many chocolate beverages are swimming in added sugar. Flavored milks regularly have 20, 30 or even 40 grams of the sweet stuff; trendy RTD coffee mochas can climb even higher.

"It doesn't have to be this way," says Christine Addington, Principal Account Manager for dairy at Cargill. In her role, she's helped dozens of companies dial back on sugar and still deliver plenty of chocolatey deliciousness. "New tools make it easier than ever. Brands will be surprised by how good these drinks can taste and how little sugar they have."

## Moooving out added sugars in flavored milks

The advances come as brands face a shifting regulatory environment. Some proposals, such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's consideration of front-of-pack labeling schemes, could impact the entire food and beverage landscape.<sup>1</sup> Others, like the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) proposed updates to school nutrition standards, have specific implications for the country's school milk providers. As part of broader efforts targeting sugar consumption, the USDA has suggested it will allow some flavored milks, but only those with "reasonable limits for added sugars."<sup>2</sup>

What's happening in the school milk space will likely serve as a precursor for retail flavored-milk formulas. For some brands, the pressure to cut back on added sugar stems from public commitments around sugar reduction; others are trying to get ahead of the evolving regulatory landscape. Either way, added sugars are on the chopping block.

Fortunately, advances in sugar-reduction technology can help processors downsize their sugar levels without turning off flavored milks' biggest fans: kids. "Children are challenging because they are so sensitive to changes, especially when it comes to sweetness," Addington acknowledges. "If it doesn't taste good, they won't drink it."

In recognition of those finicky palates, she advises brands take a "stair-step" approach to sugar reduction. "In this way, we can ease flavored-milk lovers into a lower-sugar formulation," she explains.

Brands might aim for a 10 to 15% reduction at first, in order to maintain taste parity (or even improve it). Then continue to ratchet down the added sugars over the course of a year or more, depending on the depth of the cuts. To replace missing sweetness, Addington recommends stevia sweeteners like Cargill's ViaTech® stevia leaf extract (which includes SKUs developed specifically for the dairy space) or its more-advanced EverSweet® stevia sweetener (derived from fermentation).

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Stevia is also making a name for itself in the premium, ultra-filtered, flavored-milk space. These "designer" products often boast triple the protein and half the sugar of traditional milk products. To achieve the latter, brands increasingly turn to stevia.

Of course, replicating sugar's sweet taste is only part of the challenge. Formulators must also replace its missing bulk. In this role, ingredients like carrageenan or Cargill's first-in-market SimPure® soluble rice flour take center stage, building back missing body and mouthfeel. "Pair these texturizers with our stevia sweeteners, and it's possible to create a flavored milk with plenty of creamy indulgence, but a lot less sugar," Addington explains.

### Sweetening the RTD brew

Another beverage category known for its heavy reliance on sugar is the RTD coffee space. These relative newcomers to the beverage aisle have delivered steady growth as Americans look for convenient formats, indulgent flavors and an energy boost. But sugar-laden coffee drinks can be a turn-off for health-conscious consumers. Enter Cargill, with a new approach to chocolatey indulgence.

"There's a reason chocolate-flavored coffee drinks end up with so much sugar," explains Regina Draper, Principal Food Scientist for Cargill. "Both coffee and cocoa come with inherent bitterness, so formulators lean on sugar to offset all those bitter notes."

But Cargill researchers recognized it didn't have to be. The company's new Gerken's® Sweety cocoa powders boast a flavor profile with notably less bitterness, while providing a strong, well-balanced chocolatey flavor and a sweet perception. As a result, less sugar is needed in the final application, enabling cuts of up to 15 to 30% without additional sweeteners or artificial ingredients.

Sweety cocoa powders were designed specifically for the beverage market, so in addition to RTD coffees,

Draper says they are also a good choice for plant-based beverages, or most any chocolate-flavored drink with cocoa inclusion levels above 1.5%.

The Sweety range includes two distinct cocoa powders, giving brands the choice between Revelry, with its stronger chocolate and cocoa notes; and Bliss, which offers a milder chocolate flavor and heightened creaminess. Regardless of the cocoa powder used, Cargill's sensory testing affirms Sweety's chocolatey flavor is a hit with both adults and children.

While Sweety enables sugar reductions of up to 30%, Draper acknowledges that many brands are eyeing deeper cuts. "That's where Cargill's full expertise and ingredient portfolio really shine," she says. "As brands work to drive added sugar down to zero, pairing Sweety cocoa powder with one of our stevia technologies enables us to deliver bigger reductions, yet still create a great-tasting product."

"The good news is we have years of experience doing both," Addington says. "That's the real value of Cargill – we have experts in cocoa powders, texturizers and stevia-based sweeteners working alongside beverage application specialists."

It gives us a knowledge base second to none, which we use to help customers fine-tune formulas and deliver products that consumers love."

See how Cargill expertise can help you create surprisingly indulgent chocolate drinks with significantly less sugar.

### LEARN MORE

EverSweet® is a product of Avansya, a joint venture of DSM and Cargill.

#### Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Food Navigator USA. "FDA Explores Front-of-Pack Labeling Again, but Early Discord Suggests Uphill Battle." January 31, 2023. FDA explores front-of-pack labeling again ([foodnavigator-usa.com](https://www.foodnavigator-usa.com))

<sup>2</sup> USDA. "Proposed Updates to the School Nutrition Standards." <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/nutrition-standards-proposed-rule-milk>

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