

SA's first Agave Nectar plant looks to expand

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In September 2008, SA's first agave nectar producing plant was commissioned in Bothaville, Free State. Agave nectar (also called syrup) is a [sweetener](#) which is only commercially produced in one other factory, in Mexico - the large Dipa Sausa factory. Dipa Sausa only sells in bulk, and its production is used:

- In bulk as a [sweetener](#) - it is the [sweetener](#) used in Coke zero and Pepsi Max in the US.
- In end/retail [sweetener](#) products sold (mainly in squeeze bottles) in the US and EU.

However, says Brian Neary, CEO and founder of Agave Nectar SA: "Mexico has the limitation that the primary use there for agave is in the production of tequila."

"This 100% natural liquid [sweetener](#) which is known to the Mexicans as the 'Nectar of the Gods' looks and tastes like honey but is less viscous. Nutrition experts say agave nectar is far healthier than sugar due to its low glycemic index (GI) value - while regular table sugar has a GI value of 68, and honey a GI of 55, the GI of agave nectar is 20-25. Says Neary: "This means that sweet-toothed consumers will not experience the extreme energy highs-and-lows commonly associated with sugar rushes. And because agave nectar is much sweeter than sugar or honey, consumers also do not need to use as much and can therefore cut their calorie intake. It is also ideal for use by diabetics."

"Its composition is 20% sucrose/ glucose and 80% fructose, but this fructose is in its natural form - unlike high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). A tablespoon contains about 16g of carbohydrate and 60 calories. Agave nectar is organic, natural, unrefined, economical, gluten-free, vegan and kosher. Our nectar is processed below 60°C to protect the natural plant [enzymes](#) and pure flavour and is therefore raw."

Neary's facility is currently processing 50 large agave plants per week, producing 2,600 litres of raw juice per week. It produced 10t of agave nectar in the three months after commissioning. The liquid sells at about R65/kg. The current factory and harvesting equipment (including earthmoving equipment), cost Neary an investment of about R800,000.

Because demand for the product is already strong in SA - Neary says he could sell much more than he produces - he is now looking for an investor with about R1m to raise production levels to about 25t/month of agave nectar. He says, for instance that "a large soft drink company" is interested in using the material as a [sweetener](#) in SA.

There are a number of other companies that want to produce diabetic foods and

sauces using this [sweetener](#). Woolworths has shown interest in it as an organic [sweetener](#). Agave Nectar plans to eventually produce an end product in the form of a liquid [sweetener](#).

- **Agave**

supplies

SA is "lucky in that we have got vast plantations of agave farms. There are, for instance, about 60m agave plants around Graaff-Reinet," he says. There are also many plants elsewhere in the Karoo and in the Free State, including Bothaville. His factory only uses wild plants because its production is organic.

Also, his tests have shown that the wild plants have a higher inulin content of up to 35% (compared to 18% for cultivated plants) because they are generally older than those harvested from cultivation.

An agave plant will be harvested after growing for 8-12 years and the harvesting of it destroys the plant. The plant self-destructs anyway after it forms a "pole" (the male and female organ) and harvesting must be undertaken before the pole is formed.

However agave produces perhaps 80 small plants under it and a way of sustaining and perpetuating the resource is to plant them out.

- **Production**

Neary, a former production manager of the Agave Distillery in Graaff-Reinet, formulated the project in the 18 months since he left the distillery in August 2006. The distillery was recently sold by auction - it is not yet known who the buyers are and whether it will be broken up or was bought as a going concern (for more on the distillery, search for "agave" on www.developotechnology.com). Neary says the Agave Nectar project was "difficult and [technical](#)" - for instance, the composition of the agave flesh varies according to the time of year. In harvesting, the leaves are cut off and the core is removed. It then resembles a large pineapple - "the pina".

The pina is pressed, filtered and gently cooked for several days to break down the complex carbohydrates (primarily fructose) into sugars. An [enzyme](#) is added to the milky agave juice, transforming the liquid into syrup.

Neary says that the facility's production so far has mainly been sold in bulk to the SA [food](#) industry, and has been particularly in demand from companies wanting to produce low GI products. About half of production so far has been rendered to a powdered [sweetener](#). - Teigue Payne

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