

THE PLAIN DEALER

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## NUTRITION

# Mona Vie fans drink to benefits of acai berry

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Marci Marg, trim and blond, unblushingly calls herself a drinker, but then again, so does her husband, Ken.

Their 20-year-old son, whom they call health-conscious, drinks, too. And their daughters, 18 and 14, soon will.

That's a lot of Mona Vie, a non-alcoholic juice elixir packaged in a sleek bottle. The product contains 18 fruit juices, most importantly the juice of a grape-sized deep purple acai (pronounced a-sai'-ee) berry — the latest in the parade of exotic fruits vying for health food stardom.

The berry, a rich source of antioxidants — compounds that prevent cell damage that accelerates the aging process and can lead to illness, including cancer — is extolled as "the world's No. 1 super-food" by talk show darling Dr. Nicholas Perricone, author of three New York Times best sellers on health, beauty and longevity. And the dermatologist's endorsement has gained traction on Oprah Winfrey's Web site.

Its superlative nutritional qualities don't come cheap. Mona Vie retails for \$40 to \$45 for one person's weekly supply, but the Margs of Pepper Pike get it wholesale, about \$20, because they're distributors.

Less expensive acai-berry juice products are available, including Sambazon brand fruit drinks at East Side Giant Eagle stores and Whole Foods Markets, but none have made Mona Vie's splash in the health-food marketplace.

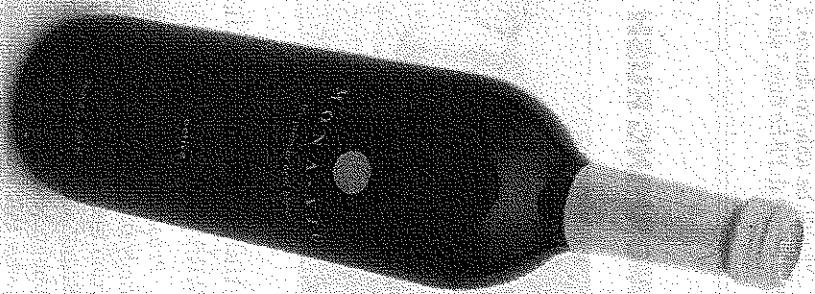
"Everyone is jumping on the acai-berry bandwagon," said Mona Vie spokeswoman Julie Jenkins. "Tropicana is going to put it in something."

### Like being a member of a wholesale club

Despite rumblings otherwise, Mona Vie's sales vehicle isn't an illegal pyramid, or Ponzi scheme, said Amy Robinson, vice president for communications of the Direct Selling Association, a trade group for multilevel marketing companies.

"With a pyramid, you pay a high upfront fee to begin, and you get paid for recruiting distributors, not selling," she said. "Mona Vie seems to follow what one would expect for a multilevel marketing plan."

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Mona Vie comes in two strengths: active, which contains glucosamine and is for adults, and regular for children. Health problems caused Pepper Pike resident Marci Marg to try the expensive blend. "I was not one who had the healthiest diet, so I owed myself a chance to try it," she said.

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## BENEFITS

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### Mona Vie enthusiasts

The Utah-based Mona Vie operates not unlike Tupperware or Avon, in which distributors' earnings are based on sales. Distributors pay \$39 a year for membership, and many sign up only to buy the product for themselves at wholesale prices.

"It's like being a member of Sam's Club or Costco," Robinson said.

Federal Trade Commission spokeswoman Claudia Farrell said the agency has taken no law enforcement action against Mona Vie.

Marci Marg began selling Mona Vie out of appreciation for the product.

"I wanted everyone I love to drink this juice," she said. "The passion evolved. I never intended it to be a business. I don't look at it as selling."

Her enthusiasm grew as she drank two ounces twice a day for six months. She said it alleviated the chronic joint and neck pain, migraines and low-energy level that had plagued her since she was in a severe auto accident at 21.

"I lived on Advil for a long time," she said.

Ken Marg, 54, started sipping the syrupy drink when he observed that his wife was getting up at 7 a.m. instead of 10 a.m.

"My father asked me, 'How can it help one person sleep and give another energy,'" said Marci Marg, 49. "I said it just gives the body what it needs."

### Just another good berry?

To the American Dietetic Association, the acai is just another terrific berry, a good source of anti-oxidants, but not necessarily magic.

"It's the 'newest, latest, greatest anti-oxidant,'" said national spokeswoman Amy Jamieson-Petonic, a registered dietitian. "But there's not enough peer-reviewed research to support it."

Other fruits, including blueberries, grapes, guavas, mangoes, raspberries and pomegranates, are also excellent sources of anti-oxidants.

The tantalizing possibility that the berry might live up to the hype emerged in the January 2006 issue of the Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry. University of Florida researchers reported that four out of six acai berry extracts killed 35 percent to 86 percent of leukemia cells when applied for 24 hours. The primary investigator, Stephen Talcott, now an assistant professor at Texas A&M University, declined to discuss the study or name its sponsor.

The study falls short for the Dietetic Association and Jamie-Petonic.

"Being the scientist I am, I need a double-blind, placebo-based trial to guide my path," she said.

But Joshua Bomser, an Ohio State University assistant professor and berry researcher, said Talcott's study demonstrated the value of studying foods not commonly eaten in this country. Bomser has studied the bilberry, lingonberry and blueberry and found that bilberry extracts reduced the incidence of skin tumors in mice.

He cautioned that consumers shouldn't expect any one food to be a nutritional magic bullet.

"A balanced, moderate diet that includes a variety of fruits and vegetables is your best bet," he said. "Increased fruit and vegetable consumption is associated with a reduced risk for a number of chronic diseases," although the specific components responsible for these health benefits are not well established.

Mona Vie doesn't claim it is anything but a rich source of phytochemicals and antioxidants. In fact, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Mona Vie acted quickly to stop a distributor's Web site from suggesting that the berry has therapeutic qualities.

"We call it food," said Jenkins, the Mona Vie spokeswoman. And the Margs call it delious.

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