

SO, HAS SUGAR (FINALLY) MET ITS MATCH?



BY MARISA SPIROS

It's the holy grail for food makers and consumers alike – the search for a healthy, safe, natural alternative to sugar. An innovative new product developed in Israel – with a unique African ingredient – may be the closest we have yet come to reaching that sweet spot.

It's called HEYLO, a product that its makers describe as a world-first "real alternative to sugar that is truly delicious, 100% natural, and has no texture or taste trade-offs". Its formula is "so advanced and yet so simple and breakthrough" that it is now protected by a global patent.

HEYLO is a blend of stevia with a prebiotic dietary fibre coating obtained from the gum of African acacia trees. This coating creates a "revolutionary synergy" that makes the product look, taste and feel much like the real "white stuff" in your mouth, says HEYLO's creator, Israeli software engineer Yuval Maymon.

There's nothing new about stevia, of course, it is already an established part of the sugar substitute market globally. It has been described as "perhaps unique among food ingredients because it's most valued for what it doesn't do": add calories. And unlike many other synthetic non-nutritive sweeteners, stevia is a plant extract.

However, it has a bitter and metallic aftertaste that consumers find off-putting.

Maymon says HEYLO's uniqueness

lies in its formula and fibrous acacia gum coating. This creates the cleanest possible profile and a "mouth feel" and taste that make it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish from the "real" sweet stuff. It also avoids all the health risks associated with sugar and sugar substitutes, including stevia.

HEYLO is new to market. It became commercially available in the USA – the FDA has granted it GRAS certification – Europe, Singapore and Israel in



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September 2017. It hasn't reached South African shores yet.

Maymon is messianic about the product not the least because it has no artificial ingredients, chemicals or hidden sugars, and has almost no calories. It also has close to zero glycemic value, so it does not raise blood glucose levels after consumption, which makes it safe for people with diabetes.

HEYLO also avoids the associated health risks with artificial sweeteners as

well as so-called "natural" one Many sweeteners are able actually to hide real sugars and synthetic components under regulatory rules, Maymon says.

And it avoids all the bitterness, acidity and metallic aftertastes that have dogged other sweeteners.

HEYLO is currently available in three primary formats: natural (a white sugar alternative); organic (a brown sugar alternative); and liquid (a dissolved and liquid sugar alternative).

The product won't change a formulation's viscosity, density or pH. It is also completely stable under most processing and storage conditions, says Maymon.

HEYLO has already been successfully implemented in many food and beverage applications. These include ketchup, peanut butter, sugar-free jams (as an addition to baked goods, yogurts and as a standalone), beverages, salad dressings, yogurts in different flavours, syrups, ice creams and more.

How and why Maymon came to develop HEYLO is an intriguing story on its own.

Maymon's background is in economics and business and law. He recently graduated with an LLB from a law school in Israel. He is formerly founder and CEO of Italek Ltd, an ice cream maker with 50 stores worldwide.

Therein lies HEYLO's provenance.

Eight years ago, Maymon was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes which



The man behind HEYLO, Yuval Maymon.
Picture: Tomer Applebaum, Haaretz

led him to declare a personal "war on sugar" and to take his first steps on the path to developing a safe, natural alternative to sugar for food makers and consumers alike.

HEYLO is the result of six years of research, 700 trials, "many sleepless nights" and significant self-investment.

There's no doubt, Maymon says, that sugar has become the "new tobacco". Robust research links sugar with the pandemic of "diabetes" – as doctors now call the twin global epidemics of obesity and type 2 diabetes. As evidence on health risks grows, so public health professionals, governments and consumers are putting the same pressure on the food industry as they once put on the tobacco industry: make changes or face the consequences (SA's new sugar tax on soft drinks is the first of what some



There's no doubt, says Maymon, sugar has become the new tobacco

says. That's where HEYLO comes into its own. Unlike artificial sweeteners, HEYLO's prebiotic

carrier actively benefits the gut microbiome, says Maymon, adding that HEYLO also results in feelings of satiety which contributes to weight loss and reduction of type 2 diabetes symptoms and risk.

Any lingering doubt about the seriousness of HEYLO's business potential dissolves in the face of the lead investor Maymon has brought on board to develop the opportunity: ED&F Man, one of the world's oldest and largest sugar merchants and part of the giant MAN Group, the largest international publicly traded hedge fund company.

He has also lined up a stellar board of directors from some of the world's largest food companies, including former top executives from Pepsico, Walmart and Target.

With all this firepower, Yuval Maymon might just go down in history as the man who toppled sugar from its pedestal to satisfy the world's insatiable desire for sweetness with a healthy choice - out of Africa.

believe will become a sustained public health attack on sugar-sweetened products).

Maymon launched his company called Unavoo in 2016 to market HEYLO. He called it Unavoo from the word for food in some African languages - the acacia fibres that HEYLO uses provides livelihoods and food for entire villages across Africa.

He devised a simple mission statement for Unavoo: "To transform the health and well-being of the world's consumers through better ingredients".

Unavoo's philosophy is Maymon's own: "In an era when both sugar and sweeteners harm our health in some way, we believe that people who want or need to be healthier should be able to continue enjoying sweeteners and their favourite foods and beverages."

One of the problems consumers face is that many foods today contain surprisingly high levels of sugar, even those that use sugar substitutes, Maymon

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