

## Pop culture dilemmas for soda makers, sugar producers



From next year, drink makers will be allowed to switch from crystal sugar to cheaper syrup.

Europe's fizzy drink makers are plotting a quiet revolution over what goes into your cola and lemonade.

New rules next year will allow companies to start sweetening beverages with syrupy isoglucose, which is around 30 percent cheaper than crystal sugar.

The big question is whether the public will stand for it. Beyond fears about a change in taste, the switch to isoglucose risks pushing Europe into a brutal catfight over whether isoglucose, or high fructose corn syrup, is less healthy than regular sugar and more likely to cause obesity. The sugar industry used to make such claims in the U.S., but many scientists now refute the idea.

POLITICO contacted a number of leading brands about whether they had plans to replace sugar with isoglucose in any of their recipes. Suntory Group, which owns the brands Orangina Schweppes, Oasis, La Casera, Lucozade, Ribena and Dr Pepper, said it preferred not to comment.

A spokesperson for Coca-Cola said the company already uses isoglucose in a number of products in Europe and could not say whether it had plans to increase that share. "In Germany, there are currently no plans to switch to isoglucose," the Coke spokesman said, adding that the company "offers different product recipes in the different countries," in which the group is active. In the Czech Republic, Sprite (a Coca-Cola product) and Pepsi Cola are already sweetened with isoglucose instead of sugar.

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Cargill has built a tasting room at its main European R&D site in Vilvoorde, 12 kilometers outside Brussels, where soft drink makers can test their own products in two versions.

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Just not the same

Sugar makers apprehend the change, but there's not much they can do. Marie-Christine Ribera, head of the European Committee of Sugar Manufacturers, said: "We are worried. Isoglucose is a direct competitor."

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But she wouldn't publicly criticize isoglucose, and it is easy to see why doing so could backfire.

When isoglucose hit the market in America, sugar makers launched a campaign denouncing the negative health effects of the new sweetener.

"The American sucrose industry fought introduction of high fructose corn syrup," said John Bode, president and CEO of the U.S. Corn Refiners Association, warning that "the competition between the two market segments became so ferocious that fighting with one another took precedence over recognizing the destructive effect of that fight."

This led to a public debate around the negative health effects of sweeteners in sodas and triggered new policies such as the sugar tax.

Sugar makers in Europe realize that they have nothing to win from a similar debate, which is why they met with representatives of the starch industry to make a peace deal of sorts: "We have worked together and we have common messages. We want to avoid a debate like in the United States" Ribera said, echoing a view also expressed by Fortescue. Ribera even conceded that "the debate on the health of isoglucose is only marketing."

But she couldn't deny herself a little dig at the new pretenders: "Our product is natural, it's extracted from a plant by mechanical means. Isoglucose is a bit more ... complicated." Prompted to elaborate, she said: "People should know that isoglucose doesn't taste the same."