

Delicious, nutritious, auspicious

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Ask any traffic cop what he finds when someone who's had too much to drink tries to mitigate the damage by swigging coffee before climbing behind the wheel of his car. Invariably, the answer is, "A wide-awake drunk."

Now, thanks to the miracles of modern chemistry, people no longer have to mess with two different beverages to achieve that sublime state: America's two largest brewers, Anheuser-Busch and Miller Brewing, have combined them in one: so-called "alcoholic energy drinks." Some smaller companies also are selling the products, which consist of malt beverages laced with caffeine and herbs.

Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madiga joined last week with 27 other attorneys general from various states, the District of Columbia and Guam in asking the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau to crack down on these products, the marketing for which, they say, is targeted at young people.

Defending Anheuser-Busch's "Bud Extra," Francine Katz, a company vice president, told The Associated Press that "Bud Extra has less caffeine than a 12-ounce Starbucks coffee."

Which is a lot. According to a laboratory study done for The Wall Street Journal, Starbucks coffee can have twice as much caffeine as other brands. A 12-ounce Starbucks' House Blend coffee contains about 186 milligrams of caffeine, compared to 116 for Dunkin' Donuts coffee and 94 for 7-Eleven's blend.

If in one hour, a 180-pound man drank three 10-ounce cans of Bud Extra, which has an alcohol content of 6 percent, he would have consumed 1.8 ounces of alcohol, enough to make his blood alcohol level at .08, the point of legal impairment in many states. He also would have consumed something on the order of 500 milligrams of caffeine, the equivalent of five standard No-Doz tablets.

Here's our question: Why is this a good idea?

For the brewers, products such as Bud Extra and Miller's "Sparks" give them a chance to satisfy the drink preferences of young partygoers who already are mixing non-alcoholic caffeine-based energy drinks - Red Bull, for instance - with vodka and other hard liquors.

In May, in response to a similar criticism from attorneys general, Anheuser-Busch discontinued a product line called "Spykes," flavored malt beverages with twice as much alcohol (12 percent) by volume, but

packaged in 2-ounce mini-bottles. Each Spykes also contained about 30 milligrams of caffeine. But with a sweet taste and toy-like bottles, Spykes clearly was aimed at very young drinkers, and the brewery wisely pulled it from the market.

The case against Bud Extra and other malted energy drinks is not so clear. Obviously, they are adult beverages and should be marketed as such. But there is no specific evidence to suggest they lead to any more (or any less) drunk driving than Red Bull and vodka, rum and Coke or even Irish coffee. Just don't expect to get much sleep.

We wonder if the real future of the beverage industry might lie in what is being called "nutraceuticals" or "phood," food and beverages mixed with drugs and nutritional supplements. Anheuser-Busch last week signed a marketing and distribution deal with BORBA Inc., which produces beverages containing antioxidants, vitamins and botanicals. You drink them to take care of your skin.

Even more exciting, however, is the news that Environostics, a research firm in North Carolina, has developed a process to bake caffeine into bread and pastries without giving the foods a bitter taste. Imagine: All the benefits of donuts and coffee in one tasty package.

Science marches on.

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