



ACAI BERRY

By Louise Elliott

Every country, it seems, has at least one unique plant, boasted about for its amazing health-giving properties. For South America, there are many; but amongst its bounty is the newest introduction to the western culture, Acai (pronounced: ah-say-ee)

Although this berry has been around for thousands of years, Acai has only been recently noticed by the modern world. For reasons discussed later, its fame is growing worldwide as a highly effective energy and anti-aging source. Although not marketed in Brazil for these health benefits, this poor man's staple has become the health seeker's salvation!

Copious advertising attention, spurred on through the likes of the American television show, Oprah, Acai is deemed the super berry for people 'on-the-go', athletes and trendy socialites. But this publicity underscores the greater potential of the plant, for ordinary people and those ailing, who can benefit too from Acai's profound health-giving properties!

Botanically known as *Euterpe oleracea* Mart., Acai is a very common palm tree in northern South America, preferring to grow in the flood plains, estuaries and river edges. Reaching about 15 to 25 meters tall, the Acai palm produces small brown to purple flowers, budding into purple berry bunches not dissimilar to small dark grapes. In fact, a palm can produce up to 20 kg of fruit per year and its cultivation for wine production is one of Brazil's most important industries.

The name, Acai, is said to be the inverse of the child's name, laca, who, in folk legend, was the granddaughter of a tribal chief, sacrificed during a time of food scarcity. laca apparently appeared in a vision to her grandfather holding the berries of an Acai palm tree, thus revealing a plentiful source of food and ending the tribe's dilemma.

As bread is a prime food in Australia and for China it is rice, Acai is a staple for the river communities of the Amazon. In traditional culture, the Acai berry was an energy food eaten by tribes-people, as well pulped into mineral-rich wine. Medicinally, the people found it helpful in building the immune system and fighting

infection. Plus it was discovered that Acai aided the remedy of the snail-transmitted disease, Shistosomosis.

All parts of the plant are been utilised in Brazilian and Peruvian herbal medicine: grated rind is used to wash skin ulcers, the seeds of berries were prepared for infusions for fevers, and the root and other areas of the plant are told to treat hepatitis. Some sources hail its remedy for diabetes, hair loss, anaemia, jaundice, kidney problems, liver disease, malaria, parasites, and menstrual and muscle pain. Modern marketers like to promote the traditional claim that it increases libido and prostate health.

The abundance of health and healing information formed about Acai comes about due to its high nutritional constitution, consisting of proteins, fibre, macro minerals (like Calcium) and trace minerals, essential fatty acids, vitamins, high antioxidants and dietary fibre. A high portion of the berry's fatty acid content is monounsaturated oil (around 60%), like that of olive oil, and in similar nature to olive oil, and likewise has a protective effect against heart disease. Its 12% Linoleic content, a polyunsaturated fatty acid helps decrease LDL cholesterol and maintains good HDL levels, and the plant sterols content are also known to decrease blood plasma cholesterol.

As previously mentioned, the TV program, Oprah, gave much fame to Acai. Show guest, Dr Nicholas Perricone, author of "The Perricone Promise", declared that the Acai berry is the number one 'super food' for age-defying beauty. The berries have an incredibly high antioxidant value, which is effective in destroying free radicals, the cause of aging.

If you recall the section on phytochemicals from the 'Big Health Words' chapter, a fruit's colour or pigment has health-promoting parts called anthocyanins. Anthocyanins help prevent degenerative disease of the heart, blood vessels and lungs, as

well as treating fibro cystic disease of the breast and diabetic retinopathy. Like red wine, Acai is a concentrated source of anthocyanins.

If you find technical lingo interesting (as I do!), one of the central anthocyanin of Acai is called cyanin-3 glucoside; said to be stronger than the predominant anthocyanin of red wine – as much as 33 more times! In fact, the measure of antioxidant, as determined as an ORAC score, sees Acai as having the highest value of any other edible berry!

Another interesting fact is that the anthocyanin content of the berry contributes only around 10% to the total antioxidant capacity; this means that there are possibly more antioxidant compounds yet to be discovered! It is thought that the combination of all the nutritional compounds in Acai could contribute to its high antioxidant value.

As with most freshly picked fruits, there is a time frame as to how quickly the nutrient value of the produce will deteriorate. This is due to the process of oxidation, causing loss of nutritional potency as the fruit ages. Interestingly, the Acai berry only has a 24 hour life span where its properties are still fresh and active. With such a short life span, the need for a rapid tree-to-shelf transition has lead to massive regional infrastructure and thousands of industry jobs for locals. To prevent the berries' nutrients deteriorating, freezing of the fresh pulp, or the addition of preservatives to pre-packaged juice products, has been necessary.

If possible, choose an Acai product that contains both the pulp and seed, as both have health-promoting abilities; plus a juice product will generally contain more viable nutrients and phytochemicals than a powdered form.

The popularity of Acai is growing globally. Already in North America it

is widely used by the sporting and fitness circles; in South America it is 'the drink' of Rio de Janeiro's surfers, jujitsu athletes and beach-goers. We have popular Australian Juice Bar chains offering customers Acai powder to supplement their drink orders, and certain Healthfood Stores offer energy bars with added Acai.

The reputation of this amazing berry as a nutritious, energy booster is certainly spreading!

This information was taken from The Superfruit Juice Book written by Louise Elliott. Encompassing research from scientific reports, plus health insights from traditional cultures, the Superfruit Juice Book provides all the information you need to know about what fruits have superior well-being and sickness-preventing attributes.

Author and educator, Louise is a presenter of public health talks and children's nutrition shows. With her passion for people and their wellbeing, The Superfruit Juice Book is an exposé of nature's remedies available for all mankind. ■

Some benefits claimed about Acai are:

- Increases energy and stamina
- Improves libido
- Better digestion
- Detoxifies & cleanses the body
- Sounder sleep
- Increases your immune system
- Lowers cholesterol
- Improves mental focus
- Anti-aging
- Relieves arthritis
- Reduces the risk of macular degeneration and cataracts
- Improves vascular circulation
- Anti-cancer properties