

# The New York Times

## Decaf Being Joined by De-Heartburn

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Much of the action in the coffee war of the last few years has been over the best-tasting brand. There, McDonald's and Dunkin' Donuts are battling Starbucks, not to mention Caribou Coffee, Peet's Coffee & Tea and numerous others. And Burger King offers a "turbo-strength" version.

But Folgers, whose cans have reliably stood on supermarket shelves for decades, has opened a new flank in the war: a "stomach friendly" coffee for Americans who think they can no longer handle the hard stuff.

Folgers is aiming the new product, called Simply Smooth, at what it estimates are the 35 million to 40 million Americans who say they have cut back on coffee consumption or eliminated it because it bothers their stomachs.

Simply Smooth, introduced last spring by Folgers' parent company, Procter & Gamble, is one of a growing number of "stomach friendly" coffees now available. Other, smaller manufacturers are also offering easy-on-the-stomach coffees, including Gentle Java from Coffee Legends and Puroast Low Acid Coffee. And one coffee company, based in Germany, has been marketing to the niche for decades.

"This is our target group -- all these people that are on Tums or Nexium and say, 'I'd rather not have a cup of coffee because it hurts my stomach,'" said Christoph Tegtmeyer, export director for J. J. Darboven, a German company that is test-marketing Idee Kaffee in Texas, with plans to expand nationwide.

Coffee companies are not the only ones heading in that direction. Orange juice -- another product cited as a stomach irritant -- has also been modified. In 2003, Tropicana introduced a low-acid orange juice to appease consumers with sensitive stomachs.

But even as the market for stomach-pleasing drinks grows, some prominent gastroenterologists question the premise that coffee causes stomach problems.

A recent study by Stanford University researchers found that there was little scientific evidence to support the idea that eliminating coffee -- and several other foods and drinks -- helps cure persistent heartburn.

"It's as much mythology as anything," said Dr. Joel E. Richter, chief of medicine at Temple University's School of Medicine in Philadelphia and past president of the American College of Gastroenterology. "The evidence that coffee is injurious to the stomach isn't there."

The Stanford study, that appeared in May in The Archives of Internal Medicine, evaluated published medical reports from 1975 to 2004 on heartburn.

The study found that there was no evidence that giving up tobacco, alcohol, coffee, spicy foods, citrus or chocolate helped decrease heartburn, known to professionals as gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD.

Research on coffee's impact on the digestive system was contradictory, the Stanford study found. "Given the conflicting reported data, the relationship between caffeine and coffee and GERD remains unclear," the study concluded. "There is insufficient evidence to support the routine recommendation that patients with GERD avoid such behavior."

Dr. Lauren B. Gerson, one of the study's authors and the director of the Esophageal and Small Bowel Disorder Center at Stanford University, acknowledges that when patients complain that coffee irritates their stomachs, she tells them to stay away from it.

But she questions the wisdom of routinely telling patients with acid reflux to stop eating certain foods, even though such advice is still offered by the National Institutes of Health and the American Gastroenterological Association.

Dr. Philip O. Katz, the chairman of the gastroenterology division at the Albert Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia, said there was plenty of anecdotal evidence indicating that people who cut back on coffee or orange juice have fewer heartburn symptoms.

Still, he said: "There are a core of people who beat up their patients pretty badly over this. It gives pause for reassessing this."

As for the idea of stomach-friendly coffees, Dr. Katz said: "The contention that changing the composition of the coffee might reduce reflux or the acidic nature of coffee would be a nice thing. But if you were going to quote me, I would like to see much more scientific data before I felt it had a foundation for which I would get overly excited to tell people to give up the coffee they liked."

Stomach-friendly coffees have been around in Europe since at least 1927, when Darboven patented its low-acid coffee, Idee Kaffee, a product still popular today.

It was German stomach-friendly coffee that persuaded Procter & Gamble to try to create its own brand two and a half years ago, along with consumer research that indicated that consumers were frustrated by the stomach problems they associated with coffee.

Nancy Lakes, section head for product research and development at Procter & Gamble, said that by experimenting with the roasting process, the company found that it could reduce the level of irritants and bitterness in the coffee while maintaining the taste and caffeine, she said.

The company estimates that stomach-friendly coffees could eventually capture 10 percent of the \$19 billion in coffee sales in the United States.

Unlike some coffees that are advertised as low in acid, Simply Smooth has about the same acidity as regular coffee. It costs about 20 percent more than regular coffee.

"A lot of baby boomers would say, 'I can't drink it like I used to,' " Ms. Lakes said.

Mr. Tegtmeyer of Darboven contended that his company's product is serving a niche. "What happens if you happen to have a stressed-out person or have a sensitive stomach? There will always be certain schools of thought. I can only say, from our point of view, it has shown to be a tremendous success," he said.

Jarrett Paschel, director of consumer and retail trends at the Hartman Group, a market research firm, said Folgers was trying to respond to competition from Starbucks and other upscale coffee vendors, and he did not expect a sudden surge in stomach-friendly beverages.

"In my opinion, this is merely another attempt in a long series of attempts by Folgers to try and stay relevant in a market which is rapidly moving well past them," Mr. Paschel said.

According to Information Resources, a market research firm, Procter & Gamble has sold about \$12 million of Simply Smooth, which comes in regular and decaffeinated, from its introduction in April until the end of the year.

By comparison, the company sold \$422 million in Folgers regular ground coffee last year, Information Resources said. The figures do not include sales at Wal-Mart. Procter & Gamble officials disputed the sales figures for Simply Smooth, saying they were "a couple of x-times that number," but declined to provide specifics.

Some shoppers in Cleveland said they liked the taste of Simply Smooth but did not notice any difference with their stomachs after drinking it. But some shoppers, like Nora Mylant, said they had seen the benefits.

On the days when acid-reflux problems are not bothering her, Ms. Mylant, 57, says she drinks Starbucks coffee. But on days when her throat is burning from stomach acid, Ms. Mylant says she drinks Simply Smooth.

"With almost every other kind of coffee, I get this acid reflux, and it hurts pretty bad," she said, adding that she drove out of her way to buy the coffee at a Giant Eagle grocery in Cleveland. "I still drink it though. Not drinking coffee is not an option."