

Chaga Health mixes ancient wisdoms with modern science



Chaga Health has its origins in the export of Estonian wild berries to Asian markets, until the founders arrived at the dramatic conclusion that instead of exporting raw materials they should utilise the potential of Estonian medicinal plants to their fullest. Adding some science to an old family recipe created the leading chaga-based elixir in the Nordics.

Chaga, *inonotus obliquus*, is a fungus that grows parasitically on birch and other trees and is considered to have medicinal qualities. The chaga-based elixir acts as a booster for the body's immune system, thus making chaga the first fungi with a health claim. But Chaga Health's founder Siim Kabrits believes that we're still in the early stages of understanding the true health benefits of chaga. "Our motto is to rediscover the wisdom of our ancestors through modern science and technology. Chaga has been used as medicine for thousands of years in the Northern Hemisphere and though we do understand the health effects of chaga, we still have a lot to learn about the exact mechanism," explains Kabrits.

Clean nature + science

The story of Chaga Health has been an endless journey of experimenting and discoveries, yet persistently moving closer to harnessing the full potential of this remedial fungus. Kabrits is convinced that chaga could be the next big thing alongside oat milk and kombucha. "We could be facing a similar journey, but we need to expand the availability of raw material." This is why Chaga Health is developing special chaga fungi at the Mycelia laboratory in Belgium to plant on birch trees in Estonia and beyond.

Kabrits says that the 600 farmers already growing chaga in Estonia are very satisfied with their perspective, as this provides them with the first feasible and financially sound alternative to chopping down the trees. "This is the first instance where we can utilise low-quality birch trees growing in very humid conditions without burning them up as firewood, hence the increased interest from forest-owners to plant more chaga on their trees," points out Kabrits.

Scientific methods are applied to extract beneficial components, which then form the basis for functional health products, utilising all the advantages of Estonia's clean forests. Mixed together with berries such as black currant, sea-buckthorn and rose-hip, the concoctions are bottled as rejuvenating elixirs which are delightfully tasty without any bitterness or sourness. "This summer we introduced a line of 13 mocktails mixed with our elixirs to incredibly positive feedback from customers everywhere - this is a fun way how to add a healthy touch to your summer banquet," notes Kabrits.



Innovation is in the driver's seat

Chaga Health's product team is constantly innovating new mixtures and formats, the latest being a 25 ml elixir pouch, which is perfect for taking with you on lengthier journeys to fight against fatigue and jetlag. Kabrits takes pride in being able to attract top talent from global food giants to join the ranks at Chaga Health. "We now have over 15 people with experience from such leading companies as HKScan, Orkla and elsewhere. People are attracted to us by the chance to be a part of the next big health revolution, coupled with the innovation and flexibility of a small-scale enterprise."

Innovation is an area where Chaga Health does not hold back on funding, according to Kabrits. Collaborating with top scientific minds in Estonia, the United States and Belgium, Chaga Health aims to provide more scientific answers to questions about the benefits of chaga. "More research means more premium products designed to deal with specific health problems, but it doesn't stop there - we're also researching ways how to assign chaga to fight against harmful fungi on trees, potentially providing further benefits to forest-owners across the globe," adds Kabrits.

Clean and smart food is the future

The future of the food industry will rely heavily on smart solutions, believes Kabrits. For instance, smartphones may be used for mapping the actual content of food products in the future. "Today we pay attention to cost and appearance when making our shopping decisions, but we will end up measuring traceability in food and the level of pesticides for example. Clean food will become a status symbol," Kabrits is convinced.

This will give Estonia a major advantage over many other locations in the world, as the air here is one of the cleanest on the planet and the lack of heavy metals means that the fungus are clean as well. Estonia is a clean and safe place and the perfect location for food production. Estonian chaga is certified as European organic food material with all the necessary IFS and BRS certificates. Full transparency and traceability is crucial for achieving this, hence it is important to know where the chaga was grown and who picked it.



Today Chaga Health exports its elixirs all over the world, with a third shipped to Asia, a third to Europe and a third to the US. Some shipments are sold already years in advance due to the scarcity of the raw material, as two hectares of birch forest yields one unit of chaga on average and it takes five years for a single harvest to ripen. The original elixir product contained some alcohol, which made export more complex than necessary, but today's product portfolio contains mostly non-alcoholic elixirs, even including a vegan version without honey.

Siim Kabrits concludes that the remedial food market is in constant flux and a great deal depends on the future of online sales. "People are growing increasingly interested in organic foodstuff and it is wonderful that Estonia has already managed to produce a number of exporting organic food startups. Estonia's image as the homeland of clean nature and clean food can only benefit from this."