



Ginseng UP is Back. But From Where? UCI and Hyun Jin Moon!

Ray Latif
November 11, 2011



A little over a month ago, Ginseng UP, a company that produces a line of ginseng-laden carbonated soft drinks – and long believed by many to be one of dozens of businesses owned or controlled by the controversial Unification Church – issued a rather odd press release. The company announced that “after thirty years of popularity overseas” Ginseng UP was preparing for a full-scale national launch in the United States. However, the product, formulated and bottled in Worcester, Mass., has been sold throughout the United States since 1981.

In a series of interviews with Vish Ganpati, the president of Ginseng UP, BevNET learned that the brand was undergoing somewhat of a relaunch focused around an active and concerted effort to distribute the product nationally. But having been in existence for 30 years, one has to ask: why now? Ganpati explained that the company was looking to capitalize on growing consumer demand for healthy lifestyle and functional drinks. Fair enough, yet when asked about the Unification Church and its involvement in the brand, as well as if and how the Church prompted the relaunch, Ganpati had few answers.

Based on numerous media reports, it is clear that Ginseng UP had long been directly associated with Unification Church. The Church was founded by a Korean religious leader named Reverend Sun Myung Moon in 1954 and is known for a contentious interpretation of Christianity in which Rev. Moon is

considered to be a Christ-like figure. Not surprisingly, the Unification Church is often vilified as a cult.

Cult or not, the Unification Church has owned or controlled many businesses in the past, including newspaper The Washington Times, fishing business True World Group, Inc., and, yes, Ginseng UP.

A public relations representative for the Unification Church, who spoke to BevNET on the condition of anonymity, stated that Ginseng UP was once owned by a holding company associated with the Unification Church. However, the representative went on to say that the holding company – which operates under the name “UCI” and was previously named “Unification Church International” – severed relations with the Church “several years ago.” He said that he could not pinpoint the exact year when the two organizations parted ways.

But the reason for the split is clearer, according to media reports: UCI is controlled by one of Rev. Moon’s sons, Hyun Jin (Preston) Moon. Preston Moon has been involved in public disputes, including lawsuits, with his family over the direction of UCI’s funding and profits in recent years.

But that still doesn’t explain why Ganpati claimed to know absolutely nothing about the company’s ownership prior to his arrival in May of 2010. Asked about that ownership, he said only that Ginseng UP is currently owned by “a small group.” Ganpati declined to give any further details, and stated, “I have zero to do with anything [related to] ownership.”

A report in the *Bergen Country (NJ) Record* was able to pinpoint an office for Ginseng UP that was located at the same address as an office of True World Group – but a True World Group representative told the paper that UCI didn’t own Ginseng UP, despite the common address.

Despite the shadows surrounding Ginseng UP’s ownership, the relaunch of the product has generated a considerable amount of interest, particularly at the recently-held Natural Products Expo East show in Baltimore. Ginseng UP was one of only a handful of products at the show using ginseng as the chief ingredient – one that has seen a steady rise in consumption among Americans over the last decade.

The perceived benefits of ginseng range from energy enhancement and stress relief to memory improvement and treatment of impotency. And similar to other Asian “superfoods” – like aloe vera and ginkgo biloba – that have slowly trickled into the United States over the last two decades, ginseng is now found in dozens of energy drinks, bagged tea blends, nutritional supplements, as well as highly popular ready-to-drink products like AriZona Green Tea and Starbucks Doubleshot.

Ganpati is betting that as mainstream awareness of ginseng continues to grow, so will Americans’ desire to consume larger quantities of ginseng – albeit in a more portable form.

“We’re finding openness, and pent-up demand for ingredients that consumers have heard of and read about,” Ganpati said. “Now, there are products – like Ginseng UP – that make these ingredients more accessible.”

Additionally, it is Ganpati’s belief that over the last 10 years, three specific health and wellness trends have led to dynamic change in Americans’ consumption habits and, in the process, paved the way for Ginseng UP’s entry into the U.S. market.

“First, there is a much larger market for functional drinks – it’s a huge demand driver,” Ganpati said. “Second, there is far greater awareness and acceptance of beneficial ingredients, like ginseng. And lastly, consumers are gravitating toward products that offer added health benefits. It’s not just what you keep out of your body – it’s now much more important about what you take in.”

And for a product that he described as “the intersection of functional, health, and well-being,” Ganpati believes that Ginseng UP is primed for success in both main-stream and natural foods channels.

As part of the brand’s relaunch, Ginseng UP has designed new contemporary labels etched with the tagline: “The Root of All Power.” Additionally, Ganpati said that company will promote the Ginseng UP through partnerships with “healthy lifestyle” organizations and utilize mainstream video marketing as means of consumer education and exposure about ginseng and the brand.

“We [want to] give consumers two good reasons to choose Ginseng UP: the taste, and the feeling you’re doing something really good for yourself with every sip,” he said.

Ginseng UP is currently sold in metro New York, New Jersey, eastern Connecticut and southern Florida. The product comes in 12 flavors and is sold in single serve 12 oz. bottles for between \$1.19 and \$1.29 and in 4-packs for between \$4.69 and \$4.89. While UNFI currently handles distribution of Ginseng UP within the natural foods channel, Ganpati said that the company hopes to go national through Walgreens, where the product is already authorized for sale in its Florida locations.

Where the profits might eventually go, however, appears to be anybody’s guess.