In Australia, they call it roselle, named for its flowering bud; agua de Jamaica, or “water of Jamaica” in Latin America; and karkadé in Egypt, the Sudan and Italy. ‘It,’ in this case, is hibiscus tea, an herbal tea infused with the hibiscus flower. It’s a popular drink worldwide that is used in holiday celebrations, weddings and even every day; on a typical street in downtown Cairo, you’ll find countless vendors and open-air cafés selling the drink. But here in North America, it hasn’t quite caught on like other foreign beverages—green tea, for example.

Nuba Tisane (Nuba), a start-up company out of Oakville, is banking on this untapped market, and has been importing the premium quality dried hibiscus flowers from Egypt to produce and package them here in Ontario. Amal Soliman, the owner of Nuba, grew up drinking the tea in her home country of Egypt, and saw an opportunity to reinvent the tart, red-hued drink for a North American palette.

Nuba contacted FIRST to collaborate in the development, optimization and commercialization of Nubia these novel ready-to-drink beverages. Principal Investigators Rob McCurdy, M.Sc. and Moira Cockburn, M.Sc. have more than 30 years combined industry experience in both product and process development. Rob’s beverage expertise includes juices, juice concentrates, smoothies, flavoured coffees, hot chocolates and bottled water. Moira specializes in market research, process optimization, sensory evaluation, nutritional testing and shelf life validation. Culinary technician Candace Rambert provided technical expertise detailing sensory and nutritional testing guidelines and results interpretation.

The research team set out to test the idea, producing almost 40 iterations using different raw materials. In an effort to modernize the recipe for a North American palette, the team tried out varying levels of sugars and sweeteners, as well as different flower varieties and commercially available concentrates.

In the end, Nuba emerged with everything they needed to produce four high quality hibiscus-infused ready-to-drink beverages. Nuba also received guidance on concentrates to expand the line upon commercial success. The Nuba team has gained a better understanding of steeping technologies, factors and product considerations when developing hibiscus tea flavour profiles, the limitations of some intense sweeteners, carbonation technology and the effects of carbonation on flavour profiles.

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