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Local woman hopes to market sugar-free margarita mix to masses

By: BRITTANIE HOOFARD , Villager staff

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Marcy Johnson, a Woodlands real estate agent, started a low-carbohydrate diet in 1998, but always felt left out when she met friends for drinks after work. A fan of margaritas, Johnson couldn't drink them with her meals because the citrus-y beverages are so loaded with sugar.

"I love margaritas, and I love Mexican food," she said. "But if you order chips and margaritas, well, the margaritas are the killer."

Johnson turned to a variety of sugar-free mixes, but couldn't drink any of them because they were too tart. So she decided to try to create her own.

"I hated them," she said, referring the mixes on the market at the time. "So one day, I just started putting stuff together in the kitchen."

The result would later become Zilch, a powdered margarita mix that is neither too tart, nor too sweet, she said. Instead of sugar, Zilch is made with aspartame, the same calorie-free sweetener that is used in diet colas. Zilch is sold in individual serving packets, each about the size of a packet of sugar. A box of 10 costs \$4.99. The idea is that the packets can be kept in someone's purse or car, or carried with them into a restaurant.

"I just order a tequila and water on the rocks, and add my little packet of Zilch," Johnson said. "You can also make a pitcher of margaritas, and make frozen margaritas. When you make frozen margaritas, people don't even know they're no sugar."

Johnson says Zilch Sugar Free Mixers conform to most national weight-loss program plans and fit perfectly into any low-calorie or low-carb lifestyles.

Johnson, with the help of her family, just launched the product in January. They've received some media attention, and next week, Johnson, her sister and her daughter plan to go to a restaurant and bar trade show in Las Vegas to pitch Zilch.

In addition, one Woodlands company, Anthony's Liquor near Kroger on Sawdust Road, already carries Zilch on its shelves. The mix can also be bought on the company's Web site, www.zilchmixers.com. Johnson hopes the get national grocery chains and restaurants to carry the product, too.

It was Johnson's son Eric, who owns a tea company in Uzbekistan, who encouraged her to market her sugar-free mix. Eric Johnson, who studies Russian in college, got started in business overseas through a college friend.

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The tea company is flourishing in the country, where a free economy is a new idea and tea is an epicurean staple.

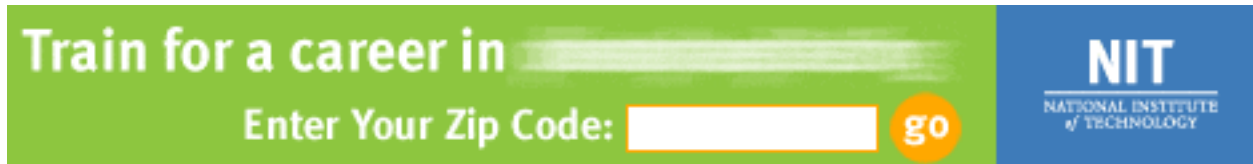
Marcy said Eric developed Zilch's entire business plan for her.

"We collaborated on the name. I was the one with the margarita; he was the one with everything else," she said.


Marcy Johnson plans to release other sugar-free flavors in the near future, including pina coladas, hurricanes and fuzzy navels.

"It's really been fun," she said.

Brittanie Hoofard may be reached via e-mail at bhoofard@mail.hcnonline.net.



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