

# White death gets health makeover



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Gordon Edwards, managing director of the KFSU factory at Ayr, in north Queensland, with the new gluten-free fibre supplement made from sugar cane

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SUGAR cane is being heralded as an unlikely health food of the future after a small processing plant in north Queensland has discovered a way to turn cane stalks into low-sugar, high-fibre, gluten-free flour.

The cane flour, made from mashed cane stalks with the sugar juice removed, offers northern Australia's 6000 canegrowers the prospect of an alternative market for their produce.

It also could reverse the poor and unhealthy image of sugarcane as the source of "white death", as sugar is commonly tagged by the medical profession.

The new cane-fibre flour, which has a processed value 10 times that of raw sugar, is being sold as a natural substitute for wheat flour to consumers suffering from gluten or starch intolerance, grain allergies and increasingly common auto-immune diseases such as celiac disease.

The first commercial production of the flour began in Ayr this week, using sugarcane harvested from the fertile surrounding Burdekin district.

Managing director of the new KFSU factory at Ayr, Gordon Ed-

wards, says it has taken \$4 million and five years of research and pilot testing to begin production of the flour, known as Kfibre or Fibacel.

"It's ironic — normally the cane fibre is the waste by-product of making sugar, but for us it is the fibre that we want," he said.

The first small factory processing 500kg of fresh green cane daily from the farmer right through to the dried fibre flour stage was opened on Monday. It is already struggling to meet an order for 1600 tonnes of the flour from Japan health food manufacturers. A larger \$2m factory is to open next June.

A Japanese health food company is using the Australian cane flour to make into snack foods with a sugar content of less than 2 per cent.

The flour is also being used in products such as non-allergenic sausages and blended with rice flour to make gluten-free bread with a higher fibre content than usual.

Processed cane fibre flour sells for about \$5000 a tonne, compared with the world sugar price of \$500 a tonne, its highest level for 15 years.

At KFSU's Ayr factory, the by-product is the cane juice, which Mr Edwards will sell as a natural drink in squeeze boxes.