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Your favorite Pepsi products will get natural dye makeover, including Gatorade and Cheetos

By Associated Press

Published Oct. 3, 2025, 11:09 a.m. ET



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Pepsi has a new challenge: keeping products like Gatorade and Cheetos vivid and colorful without the artificial dyes that U.S. consumers are increasingly rejecting.

PepsiCo, which also makes Doritos, Cap'n Crunch cereal, Funyuns, and Mountain Dew, announced in April that it would accelerate a planned shift to using natural colors in its foods and beverages.

Around 40% of its U.S. products now contain synthetic dyes, according to the company.



NEW YORK POST

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PepsiCo announced in April that it would accelerate a planned shift to using natural colors in its foods and beverages.
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But just as it took decades for artificial colors to seep into PepsiCo's products, removing them is likely to be a multi-year process.

The company said it’s still finding new ingredients, testing consumers’ responses, and waiting for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to approve natural alternatives.

PepsiCo hasn’t committed to meeting the Trump administration’s goal of phasing out petroleum-based synthetic dyes by the end of 2026.

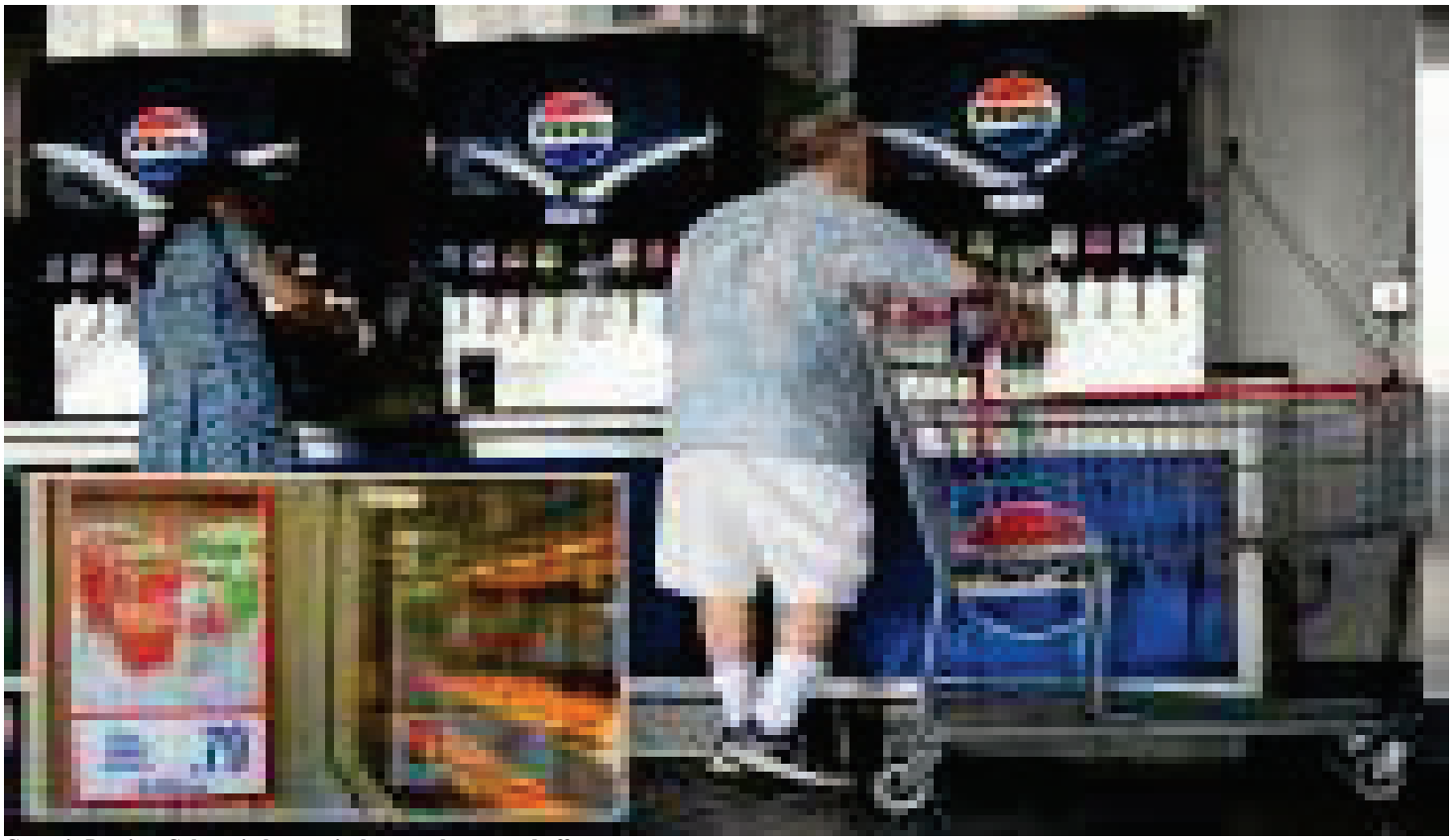
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"We're not going to launch a product that the consumer's not going to enjoy," said Chris Coleman, PepsiCo's senior director for food research and development in North America. "We need to make sure the product is right."

Coleman said it can take two or three years to shift a product from an artificial color to a natural one. PepsiCo has to identify a natural ingredient that will have a stable shelf life and not change a product's flavor.

Then it must ensure the availability of a safe and adequate supply.



The company is looking at purple sweet potatoes and various types of carrots to color drinks like Mountain Dew and Cherry 7Up, according to Damien Browne, the vice president of research and development for PepsiCo's beverage division.

AP

The company tests prototypes with trained experts and panels of consumers, then makes sure the new formula won't snag its manufacturing process. It also has to design new packaging.

Experimenting with spices to color Cheetos

Tostitos and Lay's will be the first PepsiCo brands to make the shift, with naturally dyed tortilla and potato chips expected on store shelves later this year and naturally dyed dips due to be on sale early next year.

Most of the chips, dips, and salsas in the two lines are already naturally colored, but there were some exceptions.

The reddish-brown tint of Tostitos Salsa Verde, for example, came from four synthetic colors: Yellow 5, Yellow 6, Red 40, and Blue 1.

Coleman said the company is switching to carob powder, which gives the chips a similar color, but needed to tweak the recipe to ensure the addition of the cocoa alternative wouldn't affect the taste.



Pepsi is also trying to keep products like Gatorade and Cheetos vivid and colorful without the artificial dyes that U.S. consumers are increasingly rejecting.
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In its Frito-Lay food labs and test kitchens in Plano, Texas, PepsiCo is experimenting with ingredients like paprika and turmeric to mimic the bright reds and oranges in products like Flamin' Hot Cheetos, Coleman said.

The company is looking at purple sweet potatoes and various types of carrots to color drinks like Mountain Dew and Cherry 7Up, according to Damien Browne, the vice president of research and development for PepsiCo's beverage division based in Valhalla, New York.

Getting the hue right is critical, since many consumers know products like Gatorade by their color and not necessarily their name, Browne said.

"We eat with our eyes," he said. "If you look at a plate of food, it's generally the different kinds of colors that will tell you what you would like or not."

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Consumer demand goes from a whisper to a roar

When the Pepsi-Cola Company was founded in 1902, the absence of artificial dyes was a point of pride.

The company marketed Pepsi as "The Original Pure Food Drink" to differentiate the cola from rivals that used lead, arsenic, and other toxins as food colorants before the U.S. banned them in 1906.

But synthetic dyes eventually won over food companies.

They were vibrant, consistent, and cheaper than natural colors.

They are also rigorously tested by the FDA.

Still, PepsiCo said it started seeing a small segment of shoppers asking for products without artificial colors or flavors more than two decades ago.

In 2002, it launched its Simply line of chips, which offer natural versions of products like Doritos. A dye-free organic Gatorade came out in 2016.

“We’re looking for those little signals that will become humongous in the future,” Amanda Grzeda, PepsiCo’s senior director of global sensory and consumer experience, said of the company’s close attention to consumer preferences.

Grzeda said the whisper PepsiCo detected in the early 2000s has become a roar, fueled by social media and growing consumer interest in ingredients.

More than half of the consumers PepsiCo spoke to for a recent internal study said they were trying to reduce their consumption of artificial dyes, Grzeda said.

Synthetic and natural colors are in FDA’s hands

Some states, including West Virginia and Arizona, have banned artificial dyes in school lunches.

But Browne said he thinks consumers are driving the push to overhaul processed foods.



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“Consumers are definitely leading, and I think what we need to do is have the regulators catching up, allowing us to approve new natural ingredients to be able to meet their demand,” he said.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has said it’s expediting approval of natural additives after calling on companies to halt their use of synthetic dyes.

In May, the FDA approved three new natural color additives, including a blue color derived from algae. In July, the agency approved gardenia blue, which is derived from a flowering evergreen.

The FDA banned one petroleum-based dye, Red 3, in January because it was shown to cause cancer in lab rats.

And in September, the agency proposed a ban on Orange B, a synthetic color that hasn’t been used in decades.

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Six synthetic dyes remain FDA-approved and widely used, despite mixed studies that show they may cause neurobehavioral problems in some children.

Red 40, for example, is used in 25,965 food and beverage items on U.S. store shelves, according to the market research firm NIQ.

But even if decades of research have shown that synthetic colors are safe, PepsiCo has to weigh public perceptions, Grzeda said.

“We could just blindly follow the science, but it probably would put us at odds with what our consumers believe and perceive in the world,” she said.



PepsiCo has to identify a natural ingredient that will have a stable shelf life and not change a product’s flavor. Then it must ensure the availability of a safe and adequate supply.

AP

Passing taste and texture tests

PepsiCo also has to balance the needs of consumers who don’t want their favorite snacks and drinks to change or get more expensive because of the costs of natural dyes. NIQ data shows that unit sales of products advertised as free of artificial colors fell sharply in 2023 as prices rose.

Susan Mazur-Stommen, a small business owner in Hinton, West Virginia, picked up some Simply brand Cheetos Puffs recently at a convenience store because they were the only variety available. She found the texture to be much different from regular Cheetos Puffs, she said, and their pallid color made them less appetizing.



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REUTERS

Mazur-Stommen said she agrees with the move away from petroleum-based dyes, but it's not a critical issue for her.

"What I am looking for is the original formulation," she said.

What do you think? Post a comment.

Ultimately, PepsiCo does not want customers to have to choose between natural colors and familiar flavors and textures, Grzeda said.

"That's where it requires the deep science and ingredients and magic," she said.

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