

Matthews spread joins omega-3 trend

24/09/2004 - Growing consumer awareness in the UK about the lack of omega-3 in the diet and its importance for heart-health - and the prevention of other diseases - has led supplier of butter and spreads Matthews Foods to join a growing trend, adding the oils to its dairy-free spread.

Matthews' Pure Sunflower spread is aimed particularly at consumers who are allergic to dairy products. Therefore, when they decided to up the nutritional content of their product, it had to be with a natural, non-dairy ingredient.

The lack of omega-3 in the UK diet and the importance of increasing its intake was highlighted to the company by a nutritionist. Matthews then consulted a sample of its customers and checked how the added oil reacted with the product's original ingredients.

"Taste tests proved that flaxseed oil didn't affect the product's taste or texture and we found that it still performed well as a cooking ingredient," Bronwen Arthur, the brand manager for Matthews told NutraIngredients.

Despite growing consumer awareness of the need for omega-3, Matthews found that many people were still not clear about the oils' benefits. The company hopes to play an educational role via information on the packaging of its new product and the distribution of leaflets.

Matthews also hopes that its omega-3 enriched spread will be good for sales.

"We expect sales to go up," said Arthur. *"Products that already exist in this category don't have a huge amount of branding and we want to shout about omega-3 and its health benefits on the packaging, which should attract new customers."*

Back in June, the market research firm Frost & Sullivan said that of all the functional food ingredients currently available in Europe, the future for omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs) looked the most promising.

Growing consumer demand for fortified foods has helped foster a European market worth \$195 million (€161m) for omega-3 PUFAs, accounting for 28 per cent of the global market volume.

Omega-3 fatty acids are lucrative for a number of reasons, outlined analyst Kathy Brownlie. One is the vast storehouse of well-documented research available - omega-3 PUFAs have been subjected to numerous medical and clinical trials by ingredient suppliers as well as independent organisations. This keeps them ahead of other competing ingredients like phytosterols for inclusion in a food or beverage product.

Further, omega-3 and omega-6 PUFA sources such as marine oils, flax oil and algae oils have a long, safe history of therapeutic use and some components have even been patented for use in pharmaceuticals targeting specific health conditions or diseases.

However, the most significant advantage these PUFAs have over other functional food ingredients is that like vitamins and minerals, omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids are considered essential to well-being, providing a multitude of benefits unmatched by any other food ingredient.

Moreover, scientific evidence is already growing to substantiate the role of omega-3 PUFAs not only for protecting heart health but also prevention of cancer and other diseases.

Heart disease killed 117,500 British people in 2002 but people in the UK still only eat a third of a portion of oily fish a week. Seven out of ten do not eat any fish at all, according to Food Standards Authority.