

Whole grains give pasta a healthier outlook

Contributed by Euromonitor International
Wednesday, 21 March 2007

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Pasta sales are experiencing a revival thanks to the rise in popularity of wholegrain products, which is the latest healthy eating trend to hit the global packaged food market. According to new research from Euromonitor International, global value sales of pasta grew by over 5% in 2006, suggesting that it is finally recovering from its recent decline in popularity.

Emily Woon, Packaged Food Analyst at Euromonitor International explains, "Over the last few years, pasta makers have been struggling because of market saturation, price pressures and most of all because of the low-carb trend, which saw many consumers restrict or remove pasta from their diets. However, now that the low-carb craze is waning and media coverage is promoting the health benefits of whole grains, consumer interest in the pasta market is showing signs of recovery".

Rising health awareness drives growth in key pasta markets Whole grains have received a lot of coverage in the media, particularly in the US and UK, which are among the most important markets for pasta, accounting for 17% of total global sales in 2006. In 2005, the US Department of Agriculture advised that the consumption of whole grains, such as whole grain pasta, could help reduce the risk of heart attacks, stroke, cancer and obesity. Further endorsement from Oprah Winfrey, one of the world's most influential women, has also boosted their image.

In the UK, the latest diet trend to receive a high level of media attention is the GI Diet, which is largely based on the consumption of whole grains. As a result, dieters and healthy-eaters are once again being advised that pasta, in its whole grain form, can be a part of their healthy diet. As over 50% of the UK adult population are on a diet, this has provided a key target market for pasta manufacturers, leading to pasta sales generating US\$8million in the UK in 2006.

A whole new range of innovations Pasta companies are certainly feeling the benefits, with global sales of whole grain pasta soaring by over 20% between 2005 and 2006. Euromonitor International predicts this trend will continue through 2007 as whole grains continue to be popular with consumers, and manufacturers respond by replacing their low-carb brands with a number of innovative whole grain products.

In the US, for example, Barilla has launched a new range of premium, multi grain pasta, Barilla Plus, targeting consumers who desire a healthy lifestyle and are willing to pay a premium for quality wholesome foods. The American Italian Pasta Co, with its Ronzoni Healthy Harvest whole wheat blend, also launched a new multigrain pasta in 2006, fortified with fibre and omega-3.

In the UK, innovations are concentrated on the production of white pasta products that contain the goodness of whole wheat, as UK consumers still prefer the taste of white pasta. The most popular products include Pasta Lensi's Fibre Plus and Buitoni's Fibre Rich.

Pasta makers also focus on new segments Pasta manufacturers are taking advantage of this renewed interest in pasta by targeting a number of new segments. Dolmio, for example, the brand leader in Italian sauces with a 41% share of the UK pasta sauce market in 2005, is targeting children with its latest range. The 'My Dolmio' range, launched in May 2006, offers a healthy, convenient afternoon snack, with specially adapted microwavable packaging.

Euromonitor's Emily Woon again explains, "This niche market positioning is aided by clever packaging that makes the products easy to use and safe to handle. At Euromonitor International, we predict this will be very successful in the UK as products with a strong focus on simple packaging resonate well with UK consumers".

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