

Japanese health food crazes are set to take Europe by storm

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Latest Japanese health food crazes are set to take Europe by storm, by Euromonitor International
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A new wave of functional foods, originating from Japan, are heading to Europe and look set to provide a wealth of inspiration for innovative food and beverage companies, according to Euromonitor International. 'Black food' and products enhanced with amino acids for example, which are already popular in Japan, are forecast to be the next hot consumer health trends to hit the European market.

Healthy growth for functional products

Functional or Fortified foods are already performing well in Europe, with value sales set to top US\$9.86 billion in Western Europe by 2011, representing growth of 33% between 2006 and 2011, according to the latest research from Euromonitor International. Likewise, in Eastern Europe, the market for these products is forecast to grow by 50% over the same period, generating sales of US\$1.17 billion in 2011.

Japanese health food trends are set to fuel this growth further. Simone Baroke, Health and Wellness analyst from Euromonitor International explains, "The Japanese functional food market is the most advanced in the world and is characterised by continuous new product launches and a consumer base that is highly informed on the benefits of different functional properties. At Euromonitor International, we feel that some of the most successful Japanese functional food trends will hold huge appeal with European consumers, such as new functional foods for digestive and heart health, weight management and the newly emerging black food trend."

Black magic for new food products

Black foods, such as black soy beans, black rice and black sesame biscuits are extremely popular in Japanese cuisine because of their cholesterol lowering and weight control benefits. "There is great potential for black food products in Europe as they address two of European consumers' top concerns, namely weight control and cholesterol", continues Euromonitor's Baroke. "They also have a novelty value as very few European foods are black in colour, plus products such as black rice and black sesame biscuits are good tasting, appealing to consumers on both health and taste grounds."

Jelly drinks to enhance performance

The sports nutrition market also looks set to benefit from functional ingredients already popular in Japan, in particular amino acids, which are promoted as preventing muscle breakdown and increasing the rate at which fat is burnt. Euromonitor International forecasts that amino acid jelly drinks hold great promise if promoted as 'performance enhancing' and targeted at young men. It is clear that this strategy could work as it has already been used to great success by Red Bull, fortified with taurine, which is also an amino acid.

The key to success lies in health benefits

These new Japanese health food trends will not succeed without the correct positioning for the European market, warns Euromonitor's Baroke, "Companies should avoid 'over-medicalising' a product as Western consumers are suspicious of foods posing as medicines. Focusing on and enhancing the inherently healthy properties of well-known foods would be a more successful strategy. For example, functional green teas would be well worth testing out in a European market, as green tea is already known for its health properties, so that addition of more antioxidants would just enhance the natural benefits of the product."

Food and beverage companies must tread carefully in Western Europe

Not all functional products that are successful in Japan are guaranteed to prosper in Europe. Functional chocolate for example, is a huge market in Japan, worth US\$115 million in 2006 according to Euromonitor International, with an impressive growth of 130% on the previous year. In contrast, the market for functional chocolate in Western Europe only generated value sales worth US\$53 million in 2006, a growth of less than 2% from 2005. Simone Baroke explains further, "Western Europeans, on the whole, are very traditional when it comes to chocolate and find any 'adulteration' hard to tolerate. In addition, they simply do not associate chocolate with health. On the other hand, in Eastern Europe, consumers are less purist about their chocolate and therefore functional versions may fare better."

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