Pepper and herbs make thirsty work for salt cellars

Contributed by MINTEL
Monday, 24 October 2005
Last Updated Tuesday, 14 September 2010

Latest research from MINTEL sees a major shake-up in Britain's seasonings market. Today, salt sales are slowly grinding to a halt, while the pepper market is seriously hotting up and fresh herbs sales are blossoming. Over the past few years, the salt sector has really been feeling the pinch, with sales falling from Â£23 million in 2000 to an estimated Â£20 million this year - a decline of some 13%. Meanwhile, during this time sales of fresh herbs look set to more than double (124%) and pepper sales are expected to increase by as much as 55%.
Dropping volume sales are mainly to blame, at an estimated 12% decline between 2003 and 2005, in light of healthy eating guidelines proposed by the government/FSA (Food Standards Agency). Table and cooking salt have been the main casualties, losing 15% and 17% of volume sales respectively over this two year period. Meanwhile, sea/rock salt and low sodium alternatives have increased, but between them they account for just 20% of the total salt market and so their success has done only little to halt the decline.
"Previously static sales of salt have been in gradual decline over recent years, largely affected by negative press highlighting the link between high salt consumption and heart disease and high blood pressure. Many consumers have been advised to cut salt intake and look to other means of flavouring food, maybe choosing pepper and herbs over salt," comments James McCoy, Senior Consumer Analyst at MINTEL.
Old (salt) habits die hard
Although the salt sector is clearly suffering, the over-65s still show a marked preference for table salt over any other form of seasoning. Indeed, more than three in five (61%) have bought table salt in the 6 months to May 2005 compared to an average of 55%.
"While current thinking advises against high levels of salt consumption, this generation is likely to have grown up adding salt both to cooking and again at the table. They are less familiar with the herbs and spices that have slipped into mainstream cooking, relying more on traditional condiments such as salt and pepper to season meals. They may also be more entrenched in their culinary styles, and are therefore less likely than younger cooks to experiment," explains James McCoy.
Interestingly, the Scots have also been slow to shake the habit, with almost seven in ten (66%) having bought salt in the past 6 months.
Movers and shakers
Unlike the shrinking salt cellar, the pepper mill is looking anything but black. Over the past few years the pepper sector has seen a healthy 5% year on year growth following a particularly buoyant year in 2001 (30% growth) due to high commodity prices. Indeed, in 2005 the market is set to be worth as much as Â£31 million, a third more than sluggish salt sales. What is more, volume is said to be increasing even faster, with market growth mainly being driven by sales of premium products, such as coarse and whole peppercorns.
A fresh look at the seasonings market shows that it is fresh herbs that have seen the most impressive growth in recent years. Back in 2000 sales of fresh herbs were worth just ?17 million accounting for the fourth largest share of the UK seasonings market. At this time dried herbs, seasonings and spices accounted for the largest market share, with salt in second place and pepper in third.
Although dried herbs, seasonings and spices still account for the greatest portion of the market (41%), fresh herbs now make up the second largest share, with nearly a quarter (22%) of market value in 2005. Indeed, between 2000 and 2005 sales of fresh herbs shot up by a tasty 124% to reach some Â£38 million. Pepper now stands in third place with just under a fifth (18%) of the market, while salt sales have plummeted to fourth place with just 13% and the remaining 7% of the market is made up of curry powder.
"Fresh herbs continue to perform well, more than doubling sales over the last five years due to an explosion of interest and high profile campaigns in 2001 and 2002. Growth in the seasonings market as a whole continues to be driven by evolving culinary habits in British kitchens, as sustained interest in celebrity chefs, foreign travel and eating out have provoked a change in UK diets," explains James McCoy.
A fresh look at flavours
In recent years, several factors have brought food quality issues to the fore. Food scares over processed foods, including the Sudan 1 dye, which has directly affected the seasonings market, have prompted consumers to become more aware of the food they eat. The potentially dangerous Sudan 1 food dye which was found in a contaminated batch of chilli powder, caused the recall of many food products, containing chilli powder, in the UK. In many cases, these foods bore no relation to chilli flavouring, and consumers realised that they were completely unaware of how their food was flavoured. To some extent, the seasonings market has benefited from this as consumers now realise that they can have more control over what they eat by adding their own herbs and spices, which are perceived as more natural than those in processed foods.

About Mintel
Mintel is a worldwide leader of competitive media, product and consumer intelligence. For more than 30 years, Mintel has provided key insight into leading global trends. With offices in Chicago, London, Belfast and Sydney, Mintel's innovative product line provides unique data that has a direct impact on client success. For more information on Mintel, please visit their Web site at http://www.mintel.com/. Â 24 October 2005