

Prickly Pear And Chia Seed Use Is On The Up

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The rediscovery of ancient foods like quinoa has now opened the door for other forgotten plants to go global. The prickly pear cactus and chia seeds are two of the latest such examples, having both been used by the ancient Aztecs. According to Mintel, the use of chia seeds as an ingredient has continued to grow, with a tenfold increase in ingredient penetration globally between 2009 and 2014. North America saw the majority of chia seed food and drink launches in 2013, with 47% of launches in the US and 12% in Canada, compared to 18% in the Asia Pacific region and 11% in Europe.

Chia seeds, which look to be the next big superfood, are being primarily used in food products, but recent years have seen an increase of chia seeds in beverages as well. In 2013, 12% of products launched with chia seeds were in the beverage category, up from zero in 2009. On the other hand, prickly pear ingredients are most commonly found in beverages, with 57% of all food and drink products using a prickly pear ingredient between 2009 and 2013 launched in the beverage category. Twenty-six percent of which were launched in Mexico.

“Although chia, which is a complete protein, has been rumored to reduce food cravings, lower blood pressure and aid in weight loss, studies have been unsuccessful at validating these claims,” says Stephanie Pauk, global food science analyst at Mintel. “That said, manufacturers should keep claims for chia products focused on its nutritional value rather than unproven health claims. Since 65% of US consumers are trying to include plenty of fiber into their diet, manufacturers could use chia’s high fiber content to help set it apart in beverages, as less than 1% of all beverages launched in 2013 used a high fiber claim.”

Although fewer than 100 products have been launched globally with a prickly pear ingredient between 2009 and 2013, the health benefits as well as the plant’s resilient nature make it a promising superfruit in the upcoming years, especially given the increasing number of droughts. The plant is also used traditionally in Mexico as a hangover cure and to address a range of health conditions, including blood pressure, ulcers, and fatigue. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has even suggested that prickly pear could be an effective feed for livestock.

“Both chia and prickly pear have a unique opportunity to position themselves as the next big “it” ingredient, given their health benefits and diversity of uses,” adds Stephanie. “For chia, even though it is technically an oilseed, the focus can be on pairing it with ancient grains, as US consumers are becoming more interested in those. In the US, 44% of US consumers have eaten ancient grains. Using antioxidant-rich and often gluten-free ancient grains such as quinoa or buckwheat with chia could strengthen its healthy positioning. For prickly pear, manufacturers can consider using it as a natural source of taurine and antioxidants for energy drinks or as an added source of fiber.”