

## **Functional Foods in Spain: - an industry perspective**

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The functional foods sector in Spain is one of the most forceful, with sales growing from 15 to 16 per cent every year. In 2006, functional food turned over 3500 million Euro. This peak was due to the ageing of people, the increment of purchasing power, and the change of life styles associated with working habits; this means that home-made food loses ground to fast food. Decrease in cholesterol, weight loss and improved gastrointestinal health are three of the major benefits offered by functional foods to the Spanish consumer.

### **Functional food surge**

The surprising peak for functional foods in Spain emerged in the 1990s. The reasons were diverse: 1) the public are more concerned about health and acquire foods with high added value; 2) organizations in charge of legislating this matter realise the beneficial effects of functional foods on public health; 3) the government is paying attention to this sector because it anticipates the economic potential of these products, as one of the prevention strategies in improving public health. Other factors also contributed, like technological advances (biotechnology), and the scientific research which supports the health benefits of these foods.

Experts are in agreement that these foods are not a fashion and they have arrived to stay in the market place for the long term. In this sense, the normative for their labelling is now highly developed; this is a complex process because of the required scientific studies and economic interests of food industries. Spain is in the vanguard of the functional foods industry and, therefore, can be used as a reference point for developments in functional foods. Functional foods commanded a 26% share in the Spanish food market in 2007.

### **Spanish diet**

The traditional Spanish diet corresponded to the food standard defined as the Mediterranean diet. Most representative foods in the Spanish diet have been consumed for many years, e.g. vegetables, legumes, fruits, a rich variety of fish, olive oil and red wine. The consumption of meat and dairy products was moderate. However, in the last 30 years important changes have been observed in the food behaviour of the population, according to data of the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fish and Food (2001). These changes are mainly a decrease in consumption of complex carbohydrates, vegetables, fruits, red wine and sugar, and an increase in fish, dairy products and meat consumption.

Speaking about nutritional paradoxes, the Spanish paradox is observed like Greek and French. Overweight is associated with a higher mortality and it is considered that obesity is directly responsible of 7.8% of deaths in the European Union. Of these, 70% are a consequence of cardiovascular diseases and 20% of cancer. In Spain, the obesity indices have significantly increased during the last decade. However, the mortality indices are lower in comparison with other European populations with similar obesity levels. The dietary antioxidant

hypothesis (Spanish or Mediterranean) may be a possible explanation of this paradox.

Concerning the beliefs of Spanish consumers, they have a strong belief that the Spanish Diet is still a Mediterranean Diet, with the associated benefits, and have not been consuming functional foods, claiming that their diet is healthy enough for a healthy life style. However, this argument does not stand up when viewed against a wide percentage of the population with high levels of cholesterol, triglycerides or sugar in blood, hypertension and obesity, which lead to diabetes and/or cardiovascular diseases. Special dietary recommendations need to be considered at this moment, and functional foods are now finding an important space in the market. Consumer acceptance of such foods is the key factor in the development of the functional food industry and consumers must be convinced of the health benefits which functional foods offer. The food industry must not label products without previous validation of the beneficial effect/s, and regulatory organisations must allow only those health claims that are duly validated. The Spanish food industry is making a greater use, day by day, of academic resources to evaluate and validate the beneficial effects of their products, looking for efficient biomarkers which demonstrate the effect on organic functions, including their role on health keeping and disease prevention, and also cause-and-effect relationship studies to evaluate safety and dose level. The second effort is clear and transparent communication to consumers.

### **Opportunities for the food industry**

From an industry perspective, strong efforts are being taken to launch new products, designed with special ingredients which could reduce the risk of most of the important and chronic diseases observed in the Spanish population; this also includes validating their beneficial effects.

During 2008, 38 new launches of functional foods have been carried out---12 products with functional-digestive claims, 8 products with functional-immune system claims, and several of them fortified with vitamins and minerals, and low in sugar and/or calories. Of special relevance are infant products, with 6 new launches in the last 5 months.

In this regard, the most important factor is close collaboration between food companies and research centres, but also with public organisations in order to offer to the consumer a choice of well designed functional food products with proven efficacy.