



TRILLION EURO FOOD SECTOR PROVIDES CAUSE AND CURE

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Food and drink is the largest industrial sector in Europe. Earlier this year, the Confederation of Food and Drink Industries of the European Union (CIAA) published the following key figures about the scale of the industry:

3.8m EU citizens work in food and drink
Generated sales are worth close to a Trillion euros
Food industry uses 70% of EU agricultural raw materials
Sector comprises 99% SME, defined as fewer than 250 staff

CIAA president, Jean Martin, voices the industry's response to the current public health scandal of the epidemic rise in cardiovascular diseases, chronic obesity and diabetes across Europe today:

"Europe's food and drink industry is committed to being part of the solution, as the numerous actions we have undertaken demonstrate."

"For years, we have been responding to changing consumer demands with increased choice, 'lighter' products and smaller portion sizes... We have also been doing things that are less obvious: extensive research, public education, promotion of healthy lifestyles, partnerships with doctors, teachers, schools, public health officials and non-governmental organisations, and the voluntary restrictions on advertising and marketing to children."

Broadcasting generic food and health facts based on proven, independent scientific research is now seen as the only meaningful way forward. However, as consumer choice is today driven by the increasing need to save time preparing food, the outlook for public health trends is unlikely to change easily.

Despite the presence of some very strong brands and many healthful products, the simple fact is that major brand owners have yet to realise that branded health claims have lost almost all credibility as a better educated public now actively seek the truth about why foods work, and purchase accordingly. It is the small specialist suppliers who have begun to innovate and react to consumer demands, developing niche-market health products and taking a noticeable slice of market share away from the sleeping giants.

The second largest agricultural sector in Europe is tomato for both fresh, and more importantly, processing markets. Away from the CIAA, a new research project LYCOCARD, publicly funded by the EU, will run for 5 years at a cost of 5.2M . Its focus is to determine the precise health benefits of lycopene and other potent nutrients found in tomato and processed tomato products, in preventing or treating cardiovascular diseases. This is part of a growing trend towards research that clearly establishes the scientific reasons for convincing consumers how and why certain foods can benefit their health.

“The project’s findings will lead to novel dietary guidelines which will help consumers to select specific diets to prevent and minimise their disease risk” explains LYCOCARD project co-ordinator Dr.Volker Böhm of the University of Jena.

“Lycocard will therefore improve the health of consumers in Europe (and worldwide), helping to reduce the immense and ever growing costs of health care systems, simultaneously and significantly advancing the state of the art. In addition, the position of the European food industry will be strengthened by increasing the demand for health-related tomato products, and hopefully the desire to foster healthier dietary habits.”

Research in this area is not new. LYCOCARD follows up where many studies have left off. In January of this year, a science reference book “Tomatoes, Lycopene & Human Health” was published with a chapter that looks at the previous and current scientific findings in this area. Dr. Tiina Rissanen, working in the Research Institute of Public Health at the University of Kuopio, Finland, found concrete results in the multi-centre European Study of Antioxidants, Myocardial Infarction and Cancer of the Breast (EURAMIC) (a). This project examined the association between the antioxidant concentration in fat tissue and the incidence of myocardial infarction in 10 countries.

“The study found that men with the highest concentrations of lycopene in their adipose tissue had a 48% reduction in the risk of developing CVD when compared with those men with the lowest lycopene levels. In a part of the same EURAMIC study from the Malaga centre (b), there was a 60% lower risk of myocardial infarction among those participants in the highest quintile (fifth) of adipose tissue lycopene concentration as compared with the participants in the lowest quintile.”(c)

Though these results seem to be very positive, a number of other studies have been less conclusive and so the urgent need for well-funded and intensive research is essential. Hence, LYCOCARD will hopefully establish the precise nature and reasons why the once unnoticed and humble tomato may be transformed in the hearts and minds of the public into a superfood.

As uncertainty looms while EU (processing) tomato-farming subsidies are de-coupled and phased out, the competitiveness of the European tomato industry may come to depend more and more on its ability to adapt and innovate, design and provide consumers with new health-oriented product choices. One area of LYCOCARD is collaboration between the scientists and the 4 SME industrial partners working to understand how this can be made a reality over the next 4 years.

As LYCOCARD scientists met in Paris in July to go public with their first results, industrial and public attention focussed on how this research may change consumers feelings towards this simple food commodity and reevaluate its true worth both for future public health issues and the new business opportunities which will rise from the unbending and conservative practices of the past.

Even the simplest of public health nutrition and educational initiatives can produce the most dramatic results. The confidence that comes with an informed view of food and nutrition can last a lifetime and enrich it as well as extend it. Public awareness of the value of fruit and vegetables as part of a healthy diet may be greater than their adoption as mainstream dietary staples, but it is a start.

Footnotes

(a) Kohlmeier L, Kark JD, Gomez-Gracia E, Martin BC, Steck SE, Kardinaal AF, Ringstad J, Thamm M, Masaev V, Riemersma R, Martin-Moreno JM, Huttunen JK and Kok FJ. Lycopene and myocardial infarction risk in the EURAMIC Study. *American Journal of Epidemiology* 1997; 146:618-626.

(b) Gomez-Aracena J, Sloots L, Garcia-Rodriguez A, Van't Veer P., Gomez-Gracia E, Garcia-Alcantara A, Martin-Moreno JM, Kok FJ and Fernandez-Crehuet NJ. Antioxidants in adipose tissue and myocardial infarction in a Mediterranean area. The EURAMIC study in Malaga. *Nutrition, Metabolism and Cardiovascular Diseases* 7 (1997) 376-382

(c) Rissanen T, Lycopene and Cardiovascular Disease, chapter in Rao V
LYCOPENE, ITS METABOLITES AND ITS OXIDATIVE/DEGRADATIVE
PRODUCTS: BIOLOGICAL ACTIVITIES IN IN VITRO MODELS