

Reprinted from

The New York Times

Wednesday, February 4, 2004

They Come to Praise the Carb, Not Bury It

By SHERRI DAY

If food scientists can create a seedless watermelon, surely there must be a way to take the carbohydrates out of potatoes.

Frank W. Muir, president and chief executive of the Idaho Potato Commission, admits that the thought has crossed his mind. Like producers and trade groups that promote oranges, wheat, pasta, bread and rice, Mr. Muir's organization markets a product that has fallen from favor as low-carb diets have swept much of the country into a steak-and-egg-eating fervor. And sales are eroding as a result.

In years past, food companies whose products fell afoul of the latest trend in diets could usually respond by reformulating a bit to cut down or remove an ingredient -- fat, say, or sugar -- and market a "lite" version. But no such solution is likely for foods like potatoes, orange juice and pasta, because carbohydrates are intrinsic to the food. There is no way to take the starch out of the potato, at least not yet. Mr. Muir has not even asked his researchers to try.

Even if food producers did manage to come up with lower-carb versions of high-carb foods in the lab, marketing them could risk undermining the producers' core products. But if they do nothing and ignore consumer preferences, sales could decline even further. That puts producers, especially producers of agricultural commodities like wheat and rice, who typically have modest marketing budgets, on the defensive.

While only about 3.5 percent of Americans, or about 10 million people, are following a low-carb diet, about four times that many people have tried such diets within the last year, according to the NPD Group, a market research company in Port Washington, N.Y. The food industry acknowledges that the trend has exhibited

significant staying power. But good news for companies that market foods with relatively low carbohydrate content is a call to action for industries that grow or market foods that are irreversibly high in carbohydrates.

The Atkins Diet, probably the most popular low-carbohydrate diet plan, counsels dieters to eat just 20 grams of carbohydrates a day in the first stage of the diet. (A typical potato has 26 grams; so does an 8-ounce glass of orange juice.)

The Institute of Medicine, the unit of the National Academies that sets the recommended daily intake values for nutrients, has set 130 grams of carbohydrate as the recommended minimum daily intake for adults and children. Most people eat more than that to meet their daily calorie needs while staying within acceptable consumption levels for fat and protein, according to the institute, which says that the median carbohydrate intake for men is 200 to 330 grams a day and for women, 180 to 230 grams.

Some industries that have suffered mightily as consumers either formally adopt low-carbohydrate diets or try to reduce their carbohydrate intake are beginning to wage a war for customer loyalty, often by trying to erase the stigma from their products -- in effect, asking consumers to eat them despite the carbs.

After discovering last month that concerns about carbohydrates had cut orange juice consumption by 5 percent over the last two years, the Florida Department of Citrus decided to introduce a \$1.8 million advertising and marketing campaign to promote the benefits of oranges. The agency plans to position orange juice as a "smart" carbohydrate, playing up the health benefits associated with oranges.

The group has also been writing letters to media companies and diet gurus that it says have unfairly put oranges in an unfavorable light, and has indicated that it might file some lawsuits accusing defendants of defaming the fruit.

"To us, it's insane to say it's something that you should cut out," said Andrew Meadows, a department spokesman. "Bottom line, people are not getting fat because they're drinking orange juice. That's patently false."

In April, when the United States Potato Board, a trade group, saw the latest figures on annual potato consumption -- down 4.7 percent from the year before -- the group's leaders left their potato farms and flew to Denver for an emergency meeting. A survey by the board found that consumers thought potatoes had no nutritional value. One survey question asked consumers to indicate which foods they thought were rich in vitamin C. Only 6 percent of the respondents chose potatoes, although a medium-size one has about 45 percent of the recommended daily intake of vitamin C.

"People told us in these groups they really don't read labels in the produce department," said Linda McCashion, a spokeswoman for the organization. "They were just carrying around information that potatoes turn to sugar and go right to the hip."

The Potato Board has decided to introduce a \$4 million advertising and marketing campaign -- a large advertising expense for a trade group, though some consumer products companies budget hundreds of millions of dollars to advertise their product lines. The board's 18-month campaign, which is to begin this month, will challenge consumers to "Get the skinny on America's favorite vegetable."

Most ads will be in the print media, because the group's budget will not allow frequent television time.

Other producers are considering campaigns more akin to political attack ads that would assail the low-carb diet directly. Kimberly Park, the senior director of domestic promotions for the USA Rice Federation, has suggested that her organization introduce a marketing campaign detailing the top 10 reasons she thinks consumers should avoid low-carb diets. Her No. 1 reason? The diets cause bad breath, Ms. Park claimed.

She also said that low-carb diets can cause constipation, mood swings and clogged arteries. "I presented the idea," Ms. Park said. "It may still happen, but we just haven't done it yet. The beauty of that is that it is a simple message that people can remember." (Proponents of the most popular low-carb diets acknowledge that the diets change the dieter's metabolism -- they are meant to do just that -- but they reject claims that the diets are harmful when followed conscientiously and sensibly.)

Bread and pasta makers are also working to reposition their products as healthy carbohydrates through public relations campaigns that promote the health

benefits associated with the foods. But some companies, while still supporting their regular product lines, have also created and are marketing reduced or low-carb versions to meet consumer demands.

"Our industry knows that carbohydrates are good for you, but there are dual messages being sent because when people get into the bread and pasta aisles, they see low-carb products there, which sends another message that maybe carbs aren't good for you," said Judi Adams, the president of the Wheat Foods Council, a trade group that represents grain growers. "We're confusing the consumer even more."

In December, the Sara Lee Corporation's bakery group introduced a line of white and wheat breads that have 9 grams of carbohydrate a slice, compared with about 45 grams a slice in its regular breads. At Perfection Bakeries, based in Fort Wayne, Ind., which markets the Aunt Millie's brand of baked goods, bakers are making fewer traditional and low-fat products in favor of low-carbohydrate versions. Perfection is marketing six low-carbohydrate bread products and plans to introduce reduced-carbohydrate buns for hot dogs and hamburgers.

"If people are out there looking for low-

carb and reduced carb, we'll do our best to give them what they're looking for," said Melissa Dunning, a Perfection spokeswoman. "We always want people to eat as much bread as they used to, and we like to tout the benefits of a balanced diet at the same time as we're trying to fill the market desire for low-carb."

It is a tactic that food marketers have tried before. Snackwell's, once the darling of low-fat desserts, floundered when consumers began shunning the products in favor of better-tasting foods with more fat. To regain favor, the brand infused its products with more fat, a tactic that met with limited success.

"First it was fat, now it's carbs," said Dr. Kelly D. Brownell, the director of the Center for Eating and Weight Disorders at Yale University. "People see these foods that are being labeled as being low in carbs and they think they're being issued a free pass. They're not paying attention to calories, and they're being duped once again by the food industry into thinking they're doing something positive."

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