

Savory Flavor Innovation

FEMA's 99th Annual Convention revealed some key areas for growth in the savory flavor market

The Flavor Extract Manufacturers Association's (FEMA) 99th Annual Convention took place May 4–7 at The Westin Resort, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. For almost 100 years, FEMA's Annual Convention has brought together important players in the flavor industry to exchange information and work together to address key issues of the day. This year's event was themed "Savoring our Future," and included industry experts presenting on the current state and future of savory flavors. *Perfumer & Flavorist* magazine had the chance to talk with the experts prior to the convention. Here, three of the four speakers offer their insight into the trends, challenges and opportunities for the savory flavor industry.

Trends

With unique backgrounds in the industry—marketing/sales, chef/culinologist, R&D—the speakers were able to offer different perspectives on the savory flavor marketplace. However, despite their differing job functions, they each identified a number of market trends that are affecting the savory industry. And while the trends reflect their individual roles, they work hand-in-hand to drive the growth of the industry.

Market trends: As the vice president of R&D for Frito Lay North America and head of the company's savory snacks innovation team, Mike Zbuchalski is especially concerned with market trends that are affecting savory snacking. According to Zbuchalski, the first trend is health; people are looking for healthier snacking choices.

The second trend is wellness, which has more to do with what a product can offer the mind, spirit and body than simply its health aspects. A big part of this wellness movement relates to consumer desire for cleaner labels. As Zbuchalski explains, "Consumers want to recognize the ingredients on their label and they don't want to see a lot of them . . . It provides people peace of mind in knowing what they are eating, where the ingredients come from, where they were raised and where they were produced." Eric Sparks, director of product development at Park 100 Foods, who is also a certified executive chef, also sees the demand for cleaner labels increasing. In his presentation,

Sparks discussed some current flavor enhancers and their future in regard to labeling on a finished product.

The third trend Zbuchalski sees is obesity; childhood obesity, adulthood obesity and type 2 diabetes are on the rise, specifically in the United States but also globally. As he explains, this trend "represents a great opportunity from a flavor and seasoning standpoint to provide health products that help people manage their weight that also taste absolutely delicious."

The fourth trend concerns premium taste and food. People are increasingly comfortable experimenting with gourmet, culinary-inspired products and taste experiences that are more adventuresome. The next trend surrounds the sustainability and green movement. According to Zbuchalski, "It's a huge trend in the marketplace and there's a lot of work going on at Frito Lay around the way we look at sustainability and communicating that to our customers. We collaborate with our seasoning and flavor suppliers, to make sure that our sustainability and green message is authentic throughout our supply chain." The last trend that Zbuchalski highlights is inflation and its effect on the cost of commodity goods.

Flavor preferences: For his job as team leader for the ingredient division of French's Flavor Ingredients, Joe Felipe keeps a close eye on regional flavor preferences. Barbeque sauces and flavors, which are some of the company's main products, differ significantly from region to region. Tracking regional flavor preferences can often mean researching ethnic populations' migration and growth. Two of the fastest growing minorities represent the two trends that Felipe is preparing for: Asian and Latin. As these groups move in the United States, they bring with them their taste preferences, which then meld with the local cuisine. In anticipation of these two trends, French's Flavor Ingredients has created two new sauces—Szechwan ginger and Thai.

Challenges

Each of the trends discussed above also represents challenges for the savory flavor industry. For instance, Felipe faces the constant challenge of staying ahead of the curve, in order to spot trends early and have new products to offer customers. As an example, Felipe mentions that they have some sample flavors of Creole Dijon mustards and Caribbean jerk barbeque. "We don't know if the population is ready for it today," explains Felipe, "but as we see



Mike Zbuchalski,
vice president,
R&D (innovation
and culinary
development),
Frito Lay
North America

more and more Caribbean and Latin influence and as those flavors become more regional they could become more viable.” At the same time, Felipe admits that French’s Flavor Ingredients has to develop a lot of things “close in,” because that’s what is safe for the consumer.

Formulating for health: The health and wellness trend brings to light many challenges that every flavor formula-tor and product developer has just been experiencing more of in the last couple of years—the need to provide positive nutrition and reduce the negatives. Positive nutrition involves fortifying products with fiber, vitamins, minerals, etc., in order to make the products healthier, while, reducing the negatives involves removing the unhealthy fats, oils, etc. Doing any of these will, as any flavorist knows, alter the flavor profile. Therein lies the challenge: making food and flavors healthier by adding positives and/or reducing negatives while not compromising taste.

According to Zbuchalski, Frito Lay has been focusing its efforts on this for the last 20 years. The company just recently launched a product called Flat Earth, a line of fruit and vegetable crisps. Of the product, Zbuchalski says “Frito Lay took a very bold move to innovate in an area by providing positive nutrition by adding fruit and vegetables. And these products taste great. There’s absolutely no taste compromise.” As a savory snacks company, a specific challenge for Frito Lay lies in reducing and removing the trans fat and saturated fat, and moving to healthy polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats and oils.

A key to maintaining the quality of taste in a product after reformulating for health issues? As Zbuchalski says, “We really work with our partners, our flavor seasoning ingredients departments and our oil suppliers, and we drive the development of new technology that enhances the delivery of flavor so that there is no taste compromise.”

Ensuring end-product quality: Guaranteeing taste quality is also a challenge for Sparks who, at Park 100 Foods, works to develop large-batch food products that will, somewhere in their lifecycle, be abused before it reaches the final consumer. This could mean that a frozen product has to be boiled, or it could mean that a product sits in a warehouse for months before

reaching the final consumer. As Sparks explains:

“You make your gold standard in the lab, run the analysis and you are really happy with the result. But then once you scale it up and start running 10–100,000 pounds and it has to go through all this abuse—it’s got to be heated, pumped, packaged, cooled, shipped, stored and reheated. To really master and stay on a project to make sure that six months later someone opens it up and it still delivers what they perceive as a fresh eating experience—it’s a big challenge.”

The quality of a product ultimately comes down to its raw materials. This is where Sparks finds himself battling to control the consistency of the raw materials that his company uses. This is an especially important factor

because Park 100 Foods develops many of its food products for chain restaurants, which often have items that remain on the menu all year round. This requires the company to purchase an agriculture product year-round that might only be harvested once or twice a year. "It's really difficult to manage a raw material through its shelf-life as far as the flavor and color," explains Sparks.

Taking it to the Next Level

The speakers at the FEMA Annual Convention provided attendees with an in-depth look at the savory industry from very different perspectives given their varying roles and job functions. Despite that fact, a unifying question formed the basis for all of the presentations: What is required to take the savory industry to the next level? Each speaker offered his recommendation on how to do just that.

Changing perspective: As a culinologist, Sparks offers an interesting point of view on the flavor industry that differs from that of a food chemist or flavorist. This blending of culinary art with food science gives Sparks the ability to approach flavor creation with a fresh eye. At Park 100 Foods, Sparks and his team use an approach "where we start with the culinary, we use sound cooking techniques and then we enhance with science when necessary," explains Sparks. He hopes that understanding how a chef or culinologist thinks will not



Eric Sparks,
director, product
development, Park
100 Foods

only offer attendees insights on how to approach and communicate with a product development team that's strong in culinary, but also offer new ways of approaching their own flavor projects.

To make his point clear, Sparks describes how a culinologist would approach a basic tomato sauce formula that is not sweet enough. Sparks explains that "a culinologist might add a vegetable puree knowing their product is going to be eaten six months later and they want to keep some of the natural sweetness. They might use a basil or herb extract to carry the flavor longer." Culinary plays a large role in what Sparks does, but he also has to think about the science behind it, especially if the product is not going to be eaten for months after production.

Eye on the horizon: For Felipe and French's Flavor Ingredients, the way forward is by keeping a close eye on upcoming trends in flavors. This is nothing new but can prove challenging in the face of budget and time constraints. Felipe and his colleagues believe that the innovation bell curve is vital to organizing new trends. First on the curve are emerging flavors; these are flavors and food that are only found in high class, "white tablecloth restaurants." Next on the curve are the expanding flavors, followed by the mainstream flavors. As an example, Felipe cites chipotle flavor. It started appearing six to seven years ago in niche and classy restaurants (emerging). As more people experienced the flavor, it made its way to the chain restaurants, such as T.G.I. Fridays (expanding) and today the flavor can even be found at McDonalds (mainstream). Following flavors as they move through the cycle allows flavor and food companies to be ready to develop new products reflecting the trends.

Take risks: For Zbuchalski, the key to meeting and overcoming the challenges faced by the industry is to work together. According to him, "The future represents tremendous opportunity to innovate and continue to grow our businesses. The way to effectively win the marketplace is to be bold and to do that via partnerships." Zbuchalski stresses the need to work together to develop new technology to enhance the delivery of flavor, enabling the elimination of unhealthy oils and fats, and the addition of positive nutrition. With the inundation of proprietary technology and the plight of the economy, it seems that working together and taking bold risks is a lot to ask for in today's marketplace. However, Frito Lay and many other companies, such as Campbell's and Kraft, are proof that taking risks and making changes drives market leadership. As Zbuchalski concludes:

"As we look at the trends, some of them are going to require some pretty bold investments, and some are potentially risky areas to get into that may not have an obvious, immediate payoff. These are things that we have got to partner together for. We need to agree that we have to make a difference and invest ahead of the curve to deliver what has to be done for the future of savory foods."