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GOURMET NEWS®

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Diplomatic Thaw in U.S.-Cuba Relations Opens New Market for American Food Products

BY LUCAS WITMAN

The U.S. agriculture sector has a significant economic interest in potential future exports of U.S.-produced commodities to Cuba. Even during the embargo, U.S. farmers provide 36 percent of the food that is exported globally to the Caribbean island. Business leaders hope that as trade restrictions are eased, the U.S. can once again become Cuba's top agricultural exporter, as it was prior to 1959.

"Throughout history, agriculture has served as a bridge to foster cooperation, understanding and the exchange of ideas among people. I have no doubt that agri-

culture will continue to play that powerful role as we expand our relationship with the Cuban people in the coming years," said U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack.

"Cuba is going to purchase \$2 billion in food goods from the world in 2015. I suspect that we can get back to the levels where we were before the embargo, where we were exporting 65 to 70 percent of Cuba's food needs," said Paul Johnson, Vice Chair of the U.S. Agriculture Coalition for Cuba. "Plus, as Cuba's economy grows, they are going to be purchasing even more food products."

A relatively new organization, the USACC has been promoting a renewed U.S.-Cuba trade relationship for the past year. The organization has worked closely with U.S. lawmakers to craft meaningful legislation that supports these two nations' shared goals. According to Johnson, after December's announcement of a diplomatic thaw between U.S. and Cuba, and with many anticipating the inevitable end to the trade embargo, the USACC has experienced unprecedented interest from prospective new members, and membership in

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First 3D Printed Food Products Add New Dimension to Gourmet Landscape

BY DAVID BERNARD

Think you might shy away from stocking a grape-size candy that retails at \$36 for a baker's dozen? Before deciding, you might want to hear – and see – out Liz von Hasseln and The Sugar Lab's Neon Ombre



Sours, an eye-popping confection delivered courtesy of the world's

first commercial 3D food printer. The Creative Director of Food Products at 3D Systems, von Hasseln and her team can print a variety of confections, such as sculptural cake decorations, sugar pieces for melting into coffee and other drinks, after-dinner

mints and sweet and tart candies – all with the point and click

of a mouse.

3D Systems' test kitchen, The Sugar Lab, has rolled out its Neon Ombre Sours sugar confections in two flavors: peppermint and tart blackberry. Although the candies are produced in small batches and are currently available only in Los Angeles, the company demonstrates that when it comes to the confections market, the potential for this revolutionary technology

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Good Bacteria Make for Good Probiotic Food

BY DAVID BERNARD

Interest in fermented foods has picked up recently, as scientific research documents the importance of probiotics, or "good" bacteria, in promoting digestion, immune system function and other health aspects. As food companies today respond to the consumer desire for healthful, probiotic foods, they are applying some delicious twists to the category. Not limiting themselves to traditional yogurt and sauerkraut, food companies are now making it possible for consumers to tear open a delectable fortified chocolate bar or a bag of probiotics-enhanced trail mix. Today, there is a burgeoning field of unique probiotics-rich food and beverage options available for consumers who want to pursue a healthy lifestyle, but who do not want to give up on taste.

Scientifically speaking, probiotics are live bacteria and yeasts that provide health benefits to the consumer. The relatively new field of probiotic science has demonstrated that these benefits include improved digestion and enhanced immune system function. These friendly microorganisms also help keep harmful

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Natural Grocers by Vitamin Cottage: Wading into the Mainstream

BY LORRIE BAUMANN

Natural Grocers by Vitamin Cottage opened its 92nd store in Tucson, Arizona, in January. Another new store opened in Wichita, Kansas, on February 24. Altogether, 18 Natural Grocers stores are planned to open in fiscal year 2015.

The current crop of openings reflects a combination of a growing food and nutrition movement in the United States and an ambitious goal of growing the store base at a 20 percent compound rate over each of the five years, after taking the company public in July 2012, said Kemper Isely,

Natural Grocers' Co-President.

Twenty-one stores are scheduled to open in the 2016 fiscal year, with 24 slated for the following year. "We planned on expanding our geographic footprint west of the Mississippi. Any state west of the Mississippi would be a possible target," Isely said.

The founding principles established by Margaret and Philip Isely when they established Vitamin Cottage, the precursor of Natural Grocers by Vitamin Cottage, in Colorado in 1955, are that the stores are committed to providing nutrition education, to quality, to

everyday affordable pricing, to their communities and to their employees. This is according to Patty Moore, one of the chain's Regional Nutrition Coaches. Vitamin Cottage eventually evolved into Natural Grocers, the name by which consumers generally know the brand. Though the company is now publicly owned, the Isely family is still involved in its day-to-day management and maintains a controlling interest in its ownership.

Natural Grocers' basic mission to change lives by offering free nutrition education and healthful

products that support good nutrition has not changed. What has changed over time is a growing mainstream acceptance of what used to be called "health food" and recent growing concern about American childhood obesity rates as well as an epidemic of diabetes and other nutrition-related illnesses.

In keeping with its principles, all produce sold in the chain is 100 percent USDA Certified Organic, and the company prefers to buy local products when possible. "We have a commitment to that,

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Impact of Disease-Associated Malnutrition in United States Estimated at \$157 Billion Annually

Even in food-abundant industrialized countries like the United States, an alarming number of people, particularly seniors, suffer from disease-associated malnutrition. Because of the impact on patient health, disease-associated malnutrition poses a significant economic burden, costing the United States approximately \$157 billion annually. This is according to new research published in the *Journal of Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition*. Researchers looked at malnutrition across eight specific diseases and evaluated the direct medical costs, the years of quality life lost and mortality to determine the total economic burden. The cost was calculated using existing literature

and estimates from the National Health Interview Survey, the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

When looking across the eight diseases, researchers found that more than 80 percent of the total cost came from cases of depression, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, coronary heart disease and dementia. Patients with COPD, depression and dementia had the highest rates of malnutrition at 11 percent, 10.4 percent and 7.9 percent, respectively. On a per patient basis, colorectal cancer, coronary heart disease and stroke patients account for the highest economic burden, despite these conditions accounting

for a small proportion of the overall burden. Disease-associated malnutrition affects about 10 percent of chronically ill patients in the public and between 30 and 50 percent of patients admitted to hospitals. When malnutrition goes undiagnosed, particularly in seniors, it can lead to increases in health complications, hospital readmission rates and overall health care costs.

While older patients represent only a small subset of the population studied (13 percent), the research found that nearly 33 percent of the total economic burden (\$51.3 billion) from malnutrition came from people 65 and older.

“Particularly among older people, mal-

nutrition can often go under the radar, because the focus is on treating their primary condition,” said Robert H. Miller, Divisional Vice President of Research and Development for Scientific and Medical Affairs at Abbott Nutrition. “With new research showing the burden that malnutrition has on our community and our health care systems, doctors, hospitals and caregivers should factor in the importance of nutrition and nutritional screenings to help improve health outcomes for people at risk for malnutrition.”

Additional information on the study, including authors and affiliation, can be found at www.pen.sagepub.com. **GN**

Specialty Food Foundation Announces Grants to 14 Anti-Hunger Programs

The Specialty Food Foundation has awarded \$250,000 in grants to support innovative organizations in 10 states that are working to address hunger and improve food recovery. These are the first grants to be made by the Foundation, which was established last year by the Specialty Food Association. The grant recipients were honored at the President’s Reception at the Winter Fancy Food Show in January.

The Specialty Food Foundation works to reduce hunger and increase food recovery efforts via grantmaking, education and industry events. It is an outgrowth of the social entrepreneurship and extensive efforts

in the areas of anti-hunger put forth by many members of the Specialty Food Association, a not-for-profit trade association for food artisans, importers and entrepreneurs.

Among the first grant recipients are Portland Fruit Tree Project in Portland, Oregon and Move for Hunger in Neptune, New Jersey. Portland Fruit Tree Project harvests and distributes fruit from urban fruit trees that would otherwise go to waste. Move for Hunger mobilizes the relocation industry to reduce food waste by picking up unwanted food during the moving process to deliver to food banks.

Additional grant recipients include

Ceres Community Project in Sebastopol, California; Farmer Foodshare in Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Foodbank of South-eastern Virginia in Norfolk; Food Forward in North Hollywood, California; Food Runners in San Francisco; Food Shift in Berkeley, California; Operation Food Search in St Louis; Rio Grande Food Project in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Rolling Harvest Food Rescue in Lumberville, Pennsylvania; Second Helpings in Indianapolis; Table to Table in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey; and Tarrant Area Food Bank in Fort Worth, Texas.

“With hunger a part of so many lives

today, these organizations are playing a key role in addressing the problem in creative ways for the communities they serve,” said Ron Tanner, Vice President of Philanthropy, Government and Industry Relations for the Specialty Food Association. “These first grants will help them refine and expand their important work.”

In 2015, the foundation plans to build on its efforts by awarding \$400,000 in grants, and by presenting two special events, Embrace Hunger Relief Days, to encourage the specialty food community to volunteer for hunger relief organizations. Learn more at www.specialtyfoodfoundation.org. **GN**

3-D Food Printing

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is great. It was for this reason that 3D Systems chose sweets and desserts as the initial focus of what could be a much broader application for 3D food printing.

“Confections are a great place to start 3-D printing food, because there’s already a cultural expectation of a desert as a designed object. It’s a space that values embellishment and experimentation and customization,” said von Hasseln of the new technology that can create food in virtually limitless shapes.

While The Sugar Lab’s candies and mints are the first commercial 3D printed food products on the market, that could change later this year when 3D Systems begins selling its ChefJet Pro food printer, geared toward professionals. Artisan confectioners, bakers, pastry chefs, molecular gastronomists and mixologists will be able to use the printer to create the same products as The Sugar Lab. Several other companies are also launching food printers this year, although these are geared primarily toward the home consumer market.

While the initial focus of 3D food printing will be on smaller, artisan producers, that is not to say that large-scale manufacturers are not also interested. However, Hod Lipson, Professor of Engineering at Cornell University and a leading expert on 3D food printing says that the technology for commercial-scale 3D manufacturing is still a few years off. He notes that the current small-

scale printing process needs fine tuning as well. Products are currently created using highly technical 3-D design software, the same type used to create metal aircraft parts.

“It’s sort of an overkill,” said Lipson. “The people who think up the products – chefs – currently have to learn complex software to design their own products.” 3-D Systems plans to address this issue by offering kitchen-specific software for release along with the ChefJet Pro printer that will be much more intuitive than CAD-based modeling software. This software will be organized like a cookbook, so users can choose whether they are working on an 8-inch cake round topper or a cocktail garnish for an old fashioned. The software will have a library of existing shapes that can be modified and personalized, but will also offer the capability to use more advanced tools or design from scratch.

There are three types of 3D food printing at present. The ChefJet from 3D Systems lays down a layer of powder that is then solidified with a jetted liquid, with subsequent layers added until the item is complete. The second type of printing, used by Professor Lipson and his team at Cornell, involves food pastes, liquids and gels, where a syringe-like device extrudes a paste that is gradually built into a three-dimensional shape. A third, less developed mode of 3D printing is laser-based, in which a laser device transforms liquid or powder into solid. The future of 3D food printing could involve one or more of these modes, possibly in combination.

Like with many new technologies, when

it comes to 3D food printing, production cost is a concern. As the technology is refined and becomes more efficient, the cost of manufacturing could decrease. As of now, that \$36 box of candies could come down in price as a manufacturer increases its capacity by purchasing more printers. The Sugar Lab currently prints its candies in runs of 100, a process that takes 1 hour. This productivity rate pales in comparison to many traditional manufacturing processes. Los Angeles-based The Sugar Lab will move production to a new, larger facility in Hollywood this summer, increasing its productivity.

Looking to the future, food and technology companies are also currently exploring the potential for cooking 3D printed foods. While some food printer prototypes include rudimentary heating capabilities, future versions could have the ability to cook in complex fashion, for instance, creating a pastry with a crunchy outside but soft inside. Lipson’s team calls this process “in-line cooking.”

While time will tell if 3D printing plays an integral role in the food manufacturing world, some key players are betting that it will. Hershey’s is already in the second year of a partnership with 3D Systems to develop retail products, both chocolate and non-chocolate, as well as food printers. The team’s first output, the CocoJet chocolate printer series, previewed at the Consumer Electronics Show in January. 3D Systems will be announcing plans for the sale of the printers, as well as details of their application, at a later date.

While the new technology conjures a fu-

turistic, best-thing-ever quality, 3D food printing is not meant to make current manufacturing processes better. It is meant to do something different, and valuable. Professor Lipson points out, “We’re not talking about making foods that you can already make some other way. This is not a replacement. The question is, if you have a tool that can put together food ingredients in multiple complex ways according to a 3D geometry program, what could you make with it, that you cannot make manually?”

One way in which 3D food printers could be very different is their potential for highly specific ingredient control. With food printers that contain multiple food cartridges and nozzles, a manufacturer will be able to precisely control, for example, sugar content. With one nozzle containing a cookie batter without sugar, and another nozzle holding the same recipe but including sugar, a simple command from the printer’s software can combine the two in any proportion, to meet the needs of a specific customer base – for example, diabetics. Shifting such a recipe within a traditional manufacturing process would involve a far more time-consuming process. Lipson’s prototype printer at Cornell has printed sugar cookies with more or less sugar in just this way.

“I believe that once these 3D printing tools become popular, we will see a whole generation of a new kind of chef,” said Lipson. “Basically a software chef, one that knows how to program these machines and create things that we can’t even imagine today.” **GN**