When cheese is not cheese

ARTIFICIAL CHEESE CURRENTLY ACCOUNTS FOR AROUND 3% OF THE CHEESE PRODUCED IN EUROPE FOR THE FOOD INDUSTRY. THE DIRECTION IN WHICH THE MARKET IS DEVELOPING IS CURRENTLY NOT ENTIRELY PREDICTABLE


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+ It looks like cheese, tastes like cheese and has the same bite and melting properties as cheese. However, it must not be called cheese. In many countries it is known colloquially as analogue cheese, imitation cheese or artificial cheese, but it is not manufactured from milk or milk products. Instead its milk fat is replaced by vegetable fats/oils. To these are added starch, salts, emulsifiers, flavourings and colourings, flavour enhancers, water and vegetable protein.

These imitation cheeses are more economical in a manufacturing process than real cheese. For example pure milk fat costs about EUR 3/kg, whereas vegetable fat is obtainable for just EUR 0,80. Imitation cheeses can be used sooner because they do not need a ripening process. Their melting properties and heat resistance are also better than those of real cheese, and their fat and cholesterol contents are also less. In principle those are many advantages favouring the use of cheese substitutes, but it’s not that simple. Customers are rather sceptical at present. There have been adverse press reports in the past in a few EU countries, e.g. Germany and the Netherlands.

In this respect the problem is really not so much the product itself. It is inexpensive, not harmful to health, and with its lower fat and cholesterol contents it may even be healthier. The problem is the deficient labelling of products containing cheese substitute. This has led to great resentment, especially in Germany, because consumers felt they were being deceived. With fresh pizzas and baked goods it is very difficult for customers to recognise what kind of cheese is on the product. In addition, media investigations and laboratory studies revealed that in about 20 to 30 % of the cases studied in Germany in 2008, catering establishments and bakeries had used artificial cheese but unlawfully declared it as cheese. Substitution of an imitation for part of the cheese is equally widespread. Although that is legal, it is also difficult for customers to obtain accurate information in these cases.

In Germany, where according to the French market analyst GIRA the consumption of imitation cheese in 2008 was still around 22,000 t, the amount dropped to about 16,000 t in 2009. In countries in which the media did not pick up the topic, the amount rose to a low level. According to Gira, this amounted to around 7,500 t in France in 2008 and about 8,000 t in 2009. The figures in Spain were around 7,000 t in 2008 and about 7,500 t in the following year. The amounts in Great Britain were less than 5,000 t in both years, the consumption in 2009 also being slightly less. In Italy the quantities in both years were around 2,000 t.

Thus imitation cheese makes up just about 3% of the entire cheese produced as ingredient cheese for further processing in the food industry. These products are manufactured both by dairies, e.g. St Paul in Belgium, AB Technologies in France or Molkerei Meggle Wasserburg GmbH & Co. KG in Germany – and by producers of industrial ingredients for the food sector such as Tate & Lyle in Italy.

Even though Germany is the country that is the biggest user of imitation cheese, with a large proportion of the products being destined for export, not even the German Milk Industry Association (MIV) regards it as a problem. Björn Börgemann of the MIV in Berlin says, “Analogue cheese is not in competition with the cheese industry. It will remain limited to particular segments. It causes us a headache only if the label says cheese when there’s no cheese in it.” He points out that historically it is a known problem. For example, consumers have long been accustomed to “analogue butter” – i.e. margarine.

Helmut Martell, CEO of the Association of German Wholesale Bakeries and General Secretary of the International Federation of Industrial Bakeries (AIBI), has views similar to those of the MIV colleagues, “It is purely a German issue at present, and scarcely on the agenda in other countries. Non-misleading labelling is currently still a problem.”

No-one can predict exactly how consumer acceptance will develop in the future. The French market analyst forecasts growth rates of 8% for the next few years. The introduction of a completely new and neutral name might help. That already worked quite well when margarine was introduced. +++

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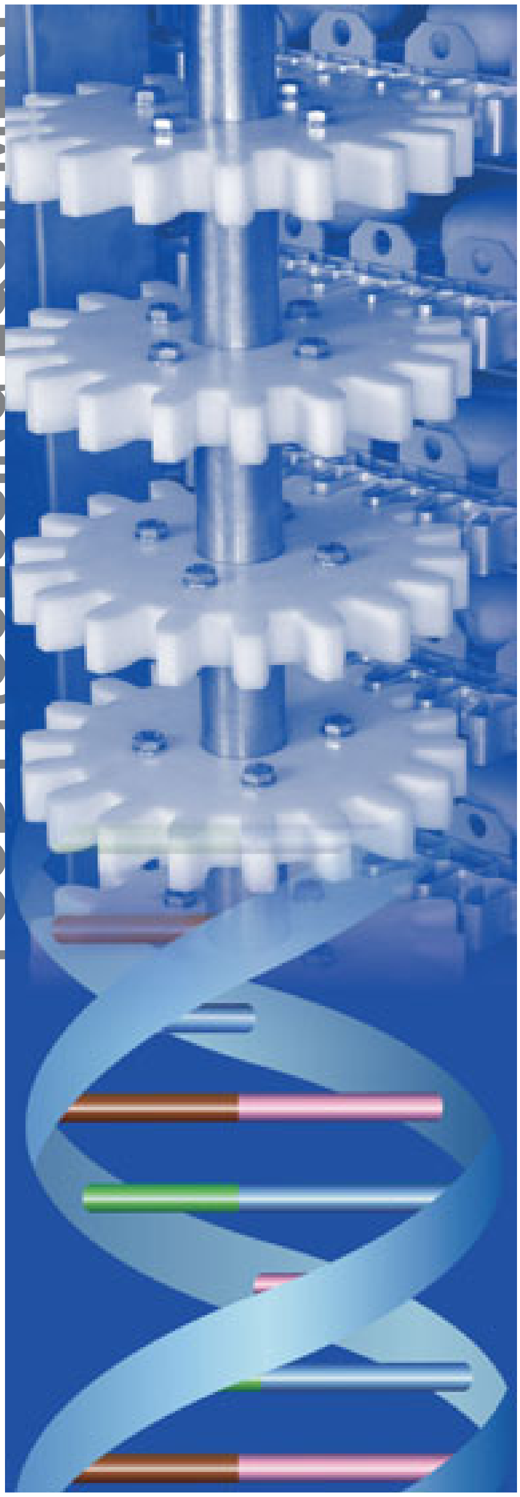

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