

Features Keeping A Finger On The Pulses

By Amanda Baltazar, Contributing Writer | April 1, 2016

Dried beans, peas, chickpeas and lentils may not exactly be taking the world by storm, but they are gaining significant momentum.



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The United Nations has designated 2016 as the International Year of Pulses, hoping to heighten public awareness about the nutritional benefits as part of

sustainable food production aimed toward food security.

This is great news for pulse manufacturers and other food developers that incorporate these ingredients into products, but much of the U.S. population is asking an important question: What the heck are pulses?

Legumes refer to plants whose fruit is enclosed in a pod while pulses are a subgroup of the legume family that refers specifically to the dried seed. Dried beans, dried peas, chickpeas and lentils all belong in the pulse family.

Rising Pulse Rate

While they may not have hit the mainstream, pulses are moving toward it, and food manufacturers are beginning to introduce more products that feature these versatile ingredients.

[13 Foods](#), Lewiston, ID, launched its pulses two years ago and they're now in 3,000 retail locations across the U.S. "It's just exploded," said the company's co-owner Linda Anderson. The products (chickpeas, lentils, red and black beans) are selling well on the coasts, driven by the health food channel, but mainstream consumers are following, she added.

13 Foods' products are individually quick frozen (IQF), cooked and sold in resealable bags. "We saw more people wanting plant-based proteins," Ms. Anderson said. "We're giving consumers a chance to use pulses as they need them to be."

Pulses align with the trend of fresh, less processed foods, she noted. "And they are not only a natural ingredient but they're nutrient-dense, high in protein and fiber. They also fit with consumers' desire to eat less meat."

Consumers around the world are eating more pulses these days, according to Helen Lundell, a consultant with the [Hartman Group](#), Bellevue, WA. As dishes like hummus become household staples people are eating more pulses without really realizing it, she said.

And there's motivation for environmentally concerned consumers too, as pulses are nitrogen-fixing crops that improve and restore soil health.

"Everyone's not going to be running out and buying pulses next week," said Ms. Lundell, "but they do have the potential to have a slow burn in creating consumer interest."

A slow burn is what [AGT Food and Ingredients](#) has seen over its 15 years of business. This Regina, Saskatoon, Canada-based company was a startup in 2001, had revenue of \$328 million in 2008, and then realized record revenue of \$1.4 billion in 2014. The company exports pulses of all kinds to 120 countries and has its own brand of canned pulses, Clic.

"Companies were looking for products that are non-GMO and environmentally-friendly with clean labels and a low allergen profile," explained Eric Bartsch, director of food ingredients. "We're seeing snacks as a big category, either in the form of roasted whole pulses, and snack products containing pulses like chickpea chips, baked snacks and baked goods."

Moving Mainstream?

"Millennials in particular are much more aware of the constituent components of the foods they're eating. They're much more careful about food," according to Omer Al-Katib, AGT's director of corporate affairs.

"Pulses are moving out of the ethnic aisle and into the mainstream aisle, and we're seeing companies take the ingredients made from pulses and turn them into other products," Mr. Bartsch said.

[Modern Table Meals](#) is one of the companies reimagining and redeveloping pulses into something new. The Walnut Creek, CA-based company offers two lines: lentil pasta meal kits, complete with sauces and spices, and plain lentil-based pastas. These gluten-free products are high in protein and fiber, but they are also shelf-stable and ready to eat in less than 15 minutes.

Modern Table Meals launched its meal kits in 2014 in natural and specialty stores but has seen such significant growth that it has expanded into mainstream stores like Target and soon, it hopes, Costco. In fact, sales for the third and fourth quarters of 2015 were up 262% compared to 2014.

“We’d like to have these products go mainstream and I think there’s a niche for them, but where there’s a lot of acceptance is the natural and specialty world,” said Jamie Thomas, director of research and development for Modern Table Meals. “Our research is showing everyone’s buying them, though especially Millennials. They are so much more adventurous.”

[SK Food](#), Fargo, ND, sells a variety of dried lentils, beans and peas, and has seen a strong business in pulses over the last few years, said spokeswoman Jennifer Tesch. “In fact it’s been the years of the pulse.”

Driving growth has been organic pulses and further-processed pulse ingredients such as raw flour, raw or pre-cooked grits; pastas; and pre-cooked pulse flakes. “That’s been a growing part of our business as consumers become more aware of the nutrition of pulses,” she said.

SK Food’s clients are using pulses in everything from soups to cereals, snack foods and dips, and they’re venturing out from there, she added. “It’s not just hummus made from chickpeas anymore, but hummus made from white or black beans, or something else.”

Ms. Lundell expects to see pulses grow across a range of applications—pre-cooked as a frozen or refrigerated product, pulses consumers can prepare from scratch and in snack foods and meals.

“Prepared foods are a route to familiarity with these products,” she said. “If people have to do something the day before, like soaking beans, it’s a real challenge; it’s really the planning that’s the problem. That barrier is not going to go away and most consumers won’t want to deal with the logistics of cooking pulses.”

Noha Waibsnider founded [Peeled Snacks](#) in Brooklyn, NY, and her Peas Please product hit the U.S. market last fall. These organic snacks, which come in three flavors—Sea Salt, Garden Herb and Southwestern Spice—are the modern, healthy version of Cheetos, she said.

“We’ve been in business 11 years—mostly with fruit snacks—and I’ve never seen anything take off so quickly,” said Ms. Waibsnider. “We have had such a positive reception and great momentum. Peas are very much on trend, providing protein, fiber and vegetables.”

The reason, she said, is consumers are snacking more and are looking for more protein and fiber from their snacks—especially protein for vegetarians.

Peas Please are sold in 4,000 specialty and conventional stores including Target and Hudson News in airports. To gain customers, the company has done a lot of in-store sampling and promotional displays. And the product is sold in different areas of the stores—most often with natural salty snacks, but also the produce section or regular salty snack department.

Expectations for the Future

Pulses are certainly finding their way into consumers’ stomachs, propelled by a convergence of several trends.

“I really think this could take off,” said Nancy Childs, professor of food marketing at Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia. “A lot of people are interested in healthy eating and they’re always looking for new products.”

And she anticipates pulses being easy to generate PR around. “I don’t think your average consumer is aware of them but when they’re built into a product’s

story it helps. It's all about authenticity.”

The challenge, Ms. Childs believes, will be product formulation “and making sure we can consume these products and have them taste good. The story is there, the trial is there, but the repeat is going to come down to good taste and easy conversion.”

However, she doesn't anticipate pulses really becoming mainstream unless big food companies get behind them and market them. “It's the larger companies that have the money to invest in telling stories,” she added.

Best sellers at 13 Foods include lentils, followed by chickpeas. Lentils are the strongest seller for the company's foodservice business “because they bring a ready-to-use lentil to foodservice for the first time,” said the company's Ms. Anderson.

Mr. Al-Katib at AGT Food and Ingredients anticipated faba beans will be the fastest of its pulses to take off thanks to their neutral flavor, extra-high protein and double-nitrogen fixing properties. He also expects to see more foods becoming mainstream as hummus did, driving pulse consumption in the U.S.

The Hartman Group's Ms. Lundell predicted chickpeas and lentils will stand out among the crowd “because people know what they are.”

Pea protein is the standout pulse at SK Food, said Ms. Tesch. “It's being used to add protein to food products instead of soy protein because there's allergen concerns with soy. Everyone thinks lentils are very chic now.” Heirloom pulses—especially beans—are also becoming more popular, she added, especially since they are so visually appealing.

Jessie Hunter, director of domestic marketing for the [USA Dry Pea and Lentil Council](#) and the [American Pulse Association](#) said chickpeas and lentils are driving pulse growth because they cook relatively quickly. “Hummus, dips and soups are where it will perhaps be first seen in the mainstream, but to start with it's coming from healthy eaters and building from there,” she said. “But with new products being developed, like granola bars and cereals and crackers that are incorporating different pulses, they're becoming more mainstream. Consumers want new ingredients but in a familiar format. It can improve the nutritional quality of those foods and it can be a gateway to introduce a new audience to these products.”

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