

# The HEALTHY way

BY JACK KOHANE

Diet trends, obesity rates and the quest for wellness  
fuel new avenues of opportunity for bake sector



## “Cut out the fat”

may well become the next rallying cry of the baking industry. Less is more when bake talk turns to batter, bread and buns.

Taking the lead is Voortman Cookies, the Burlington, Ont.-based maker of 120 cookie varieties distributed across Canada and much of the United States. “And our full line will be trans fat free by March 2004,” says Harry Voortman, the company’s president. “Today’s consumers are more aware of what they eat and we know they want healthier snacks. We’re No. 1 at making this switch, and it’s only a matter of time before everyone else follows our example.”

Adding that most people aren’t aware of the issue, Voortman emphasizes that when they become aware, they



won't want to eat any products containing trans-fatty acids. "It's really bad for cholesterol," he affirms.

According to Carol Culhane, a professional home economist and president of International Food Focus Ltd., a Toronto consultancy firm to the food industry, the Voortman's veer towards trans fat free is a good idea. "Although bread manufacturers do a great job making more nutritious products, consumers are telling them they want something more," she says. "Taking out trans fat is a timely response by Voortman, and gives the company a leg up on the competition, but it comes at a cost – eliminating trans fat also reduces product shelf life. And of course taste is king – if trans fat free foods don't meet with taste bud approval, the public will reject them. At this point we don't know how consumers will react."

Trans-fatty acids, however, are hard to avoid. They're found in many commercially packaged goods, such as cook-

ies and crackers, commercially fried foods, such as french fries from fast food chains, and other packaged snacks, such as microwaved popcorn, as well as in vegetable shortening and some margarines. Indeed, any packaged goods that contain "partially hydrogenated vegetable oils" or "shortening" most likely contain trans fats.

Before the invention of trans-fatty acids, most of the food industry, including the baking sector, used lard, palm oil or butter, which are high in saturated fats. Then researchers found that saturated fats increase LDL cholesterol (the bad cholesterol), which may increase the risk of heart disease. Therefore, manufacturers started to use the healthier vegetable oils in their food production. As liquid vegetable oils are not stable to heat and can go rancid easily, scientists began to "hydrogenate" liquid oils so that they could withstand the food production process better and provide prolonged shelf

life. As a result of hydrogenation, trans fats are formed. Similar to saturated fats, trans fats also increase LDL cholesterol and lower HDL cholesterol (the good cholesterol). Some recent studies also indicate that a diet high in trans fats may be linked to a greater risk of type 2 diabetes.

And a new study by Johanna Seddon

of the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary in Boston reports that elderly people suffering from the early stages of blindness could worsen the condition by eating fatty foods. Just as fatty foods can clog arteries, the study also found that a constriction of the blood vessels feeding the eye's retina may cause a progression of the age-related

illness called macular degeneration. "Specifically, higher intake of vegetable fat, and to a lesser extent animal fat, increased rates of progression," writes Seddon. "Diets rich in meat and dairy also heightened the risk, but not by as much as processed baked foods."

The Atkins Diet craze, a high protein/low carbohydrate regimen has made a hefty impact on the food industry in the U.S., although it has also been criticized by the American Medical Association and the American Heart Association. Only causing a ripple north of the border thus far, industry watchers in Canada are bracing for the wave to hit.

Paul Hetherington, president and CEO of the Baking Association in Mississauga, Ont., is concerned. "There's been a precipitous drop in the per capita consumption of flour-based products in the U.S. over the past few years, and still American obesity rates balloon. Will this trend come to Canada? For those who doubt, I answer: why wouldn't it?"

Going on the offensive is an unfamiliar strategy for the baking sector. Historically, the industry has been viewed as particularly consumer friendly. Says Hetherington, "Bakers make bread – 'the staff of life.' But now we need to promote ourselves better, to highlight the recognized benefits of baked products and inform consumers that the keys to healthy living are a balanced diet and active lifestyle."

Despite the spate of negative news, Canadians remain enamoured of baked goods. The latest ACNielsen Market Track statistics (Prepackaged Baked Goods, Grocery Channel, for the 52 weeks ending Nov. 1, 2003) show that sales of cookies and grahams rose 3 per cent over the previous year to \$528 million, crackers were also up by 3 per cent (\$306 million), frozen baked desserts sizzled at 8 per cent (\$66 million), and bread rose 10 per cent higher to over \$940 million. Commercial bakery also increased by 11% to almost \$1.5 billion.

According to Euromonitor International, 2003 was a good year for the Canadian baking industry generally.

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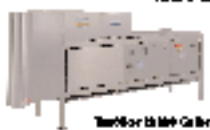
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**Prepackaged Baked Goods – Grocery Store Sales –  
52 Weeks to November 1, 2003**

**NATIONAL**

Category	Dollar Sales	Annual Dollar Sales Growth or Decline	Unit Sales	Annual Unit Sales Growth or Decline
Cookies & Grahams	\$528,013,633	+3%	208,722,115	+2%
Crackers	\$306,067,163	+3%	128,000,688	+1%
Frozen Baked Desserts	\$66,516,223	+8%	17,548,403	-4%
Bread	\$941,877,960	+10%	542,341,980	+2%
Rolls	\$208,606,263	+11%	118,575,617	+3%
Commercial Bakery*	\$1,428,669,812	+11%	797,726,681	+3%

\*Commercial Bakery includes all prepackaged breads, rolls, tortillas, bagels, baguettes, buns, etc. Source: ACNielsen Canada, MarketTrack, Grocery Banner, National, 52 Weeks to November 1, 2003

The Chicago-based market research firm reports that baked goods in this country showed strong growth in 2003 driven by consumers' choice of fresh artisanal products, including bread, cakes and pastries. Biscuits benefited


from a rise in snacking trends, while private label baked goods continued to gain shares of sales through a creation of a premium segment within the private label category. Biscuits were among the top five snack items in

Canada and a consumer survey published by the NPD Group in 2002 showed that cookies and crackers rank in the top 10 snack items for Canadian families.

*The Market for Bakery Products in Canada 2003*, published by Euro-monitor, also estimated that about 19 per cent of all biscuits/crackers consumed in Canada are low in salt, 44 per cent of all crackers eaten are low fat, low cholesterol, fat-free or cholesterol-free and 6 per cent of crackers are organic or all-natural. Similarly, 17 per cent of all sweet cookies eaten in Canada are low fat, low cholesterol or fat-free and cholesterol-free. Sweet and savoury biscuits that make claims regarding being healthier alternatives have provided the rationale for being sold at higher price points, adding value to the category.

On the other hand, indulgence and love of chocolate boosted sales of sweet

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biscuits, which was underpinned by new product launches such as Oreo Chocolate Crème and the Double Delight Oreo in two new flavours. According to industry sources, Chocolate Crème Oreo – introduced in 2002 – was among the most successful of the company’s product launches.

Artisanal freshly baked products, a

trend spurred by the rapid proliferation of in-store bakeries, are marketed as offering better quality and taste, as well as a broader variety of specialty products, including ethnic varieties. According to consumer surveys conducted in 2000 by Euromonitor, Canadians were willing to pay 20 per cent more for quality fresh bread sold

through in-store bakeries. As a result, unpackaged artisanal bread and cakes reached estimated sales of \$793 million and \$387 million respectively in 2003.

Shasha Navahesh, owner of the Shasha Bread Co., and president of the Artisan Baker’s Quality Alliance in Toronto, notices a definite swing in consumer demand for baked organic products offering no cholesterol, no trans fats and lower carbohydrates. “The trend has certainly had an impact on my business,” he nods, smiling. “My customers want healthier baked goods – I’m already there for them.” In addition to organic breads, he’s also developing a functional food line (slated for launch in 2004), including crackers, cookies and gender-based breads processed and baked to suit the differing nutrient levels and metabolisms of men and women. “It may have been a niche market until now, but the artisan bakery segment is going mainstream quickly,” he states.

Wellness Bread, with plants and offices in Vancouver and Toronto, is banking on its inulin-infused breads to heat up the market. Inulin is an insoluble dietary fibre, a type of carbohydrate that unlike others, when digested is fermented in the lower parts of the intestinal tract into beneficial microflora. “Inulin, which is also found in fruits, vegetables and even yogurt, occurs naturally in large quantities in such herbs as burdock root and chicory root – and is heralded as a prebiotic, and thus considered a functional food,” explains Karl Eibensteiner, company’s president.

Wellness Bread is currently sold only in Ontario. The company ships its white, whole wheat, multi-grain and multi-seed bread doughs in frozen form to grocery stores where it’s prepared and sold on Wellness Bread branded racks. In addition to introducing Wellness muffins, bagels and rolls through 2004, the company is ramping up to supply British Columbia, Alberta and the Maritimes over the next year. “Inulin is a well-established ingredient used in cookies, breads and buns throughout Europe and our job now is



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## CANADA BREAD LAUNCHES LOW-CARB LOAF

At seven grams of carbohydrates per slice (about one-half the normal amount of a regular slab of bread), Canada Bread burst out of the gate to answer the low-carb call by introducing its “Healthy Way” brand “Carb Conscious” multi-grain bread into Western Canada at the end of last year. The giant Toronto-based bread-maker also launched its “Dempster’s Carb Wise” white and wheat loaves in Ontario in January with plans to begin distribution to retailers in Western Canada and the Maritimes in March 2004.

“Overall these products address the consumer demand for a tasty low-carb bread option in tandem with a balanced diet,” notes Connie Morrison, the company’s vice-president of marketing. “Atkins may be getting almost all the attention, but there’s also a significant number of weight-conscious consumers out there who don’t want to eliminate all carbs as advocated by Atkins, but are looking for low-carb bread alternatives.”

The launches follow considerable investment in R&D, and particularly product development, made by Canada Bread. According to Morrison, the product certainly proved to be a finicky one. “It wasn’t as easy as first appeared to achieve the target carbohydrate level,” she explains. “We removed the starch, added soy flour and reduced the size of the individual slice to accomplish it.” She adds that it took some time to prevail over the wiles of the pernickety product to ensure that taste and texture remained exactly as consumers expect in their daily bread.

Canada Bread also plans to extend its low-carb selection to include bagels, buns and many other baked goods in its portfolio.

to educate North American consumers as to the distinction between good carbs and bad carbs and the healthy eating option offered by food products containing inulin,” states Eibensteiner.

Will the trend to no trans fat (and other dietary culprits) last? Culhane takes a cautious approach. “Like the low- and no-fat craze of a few years

ago, manufacturers invested heavily to process and market products to meet the surge in demand. Then the fad fizzled. Fickle consumers say they want change – but, well, not too much change.”

*Jack Kohane is a Toronto-based freelance writer and regular contributor to Food in Canada.*



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