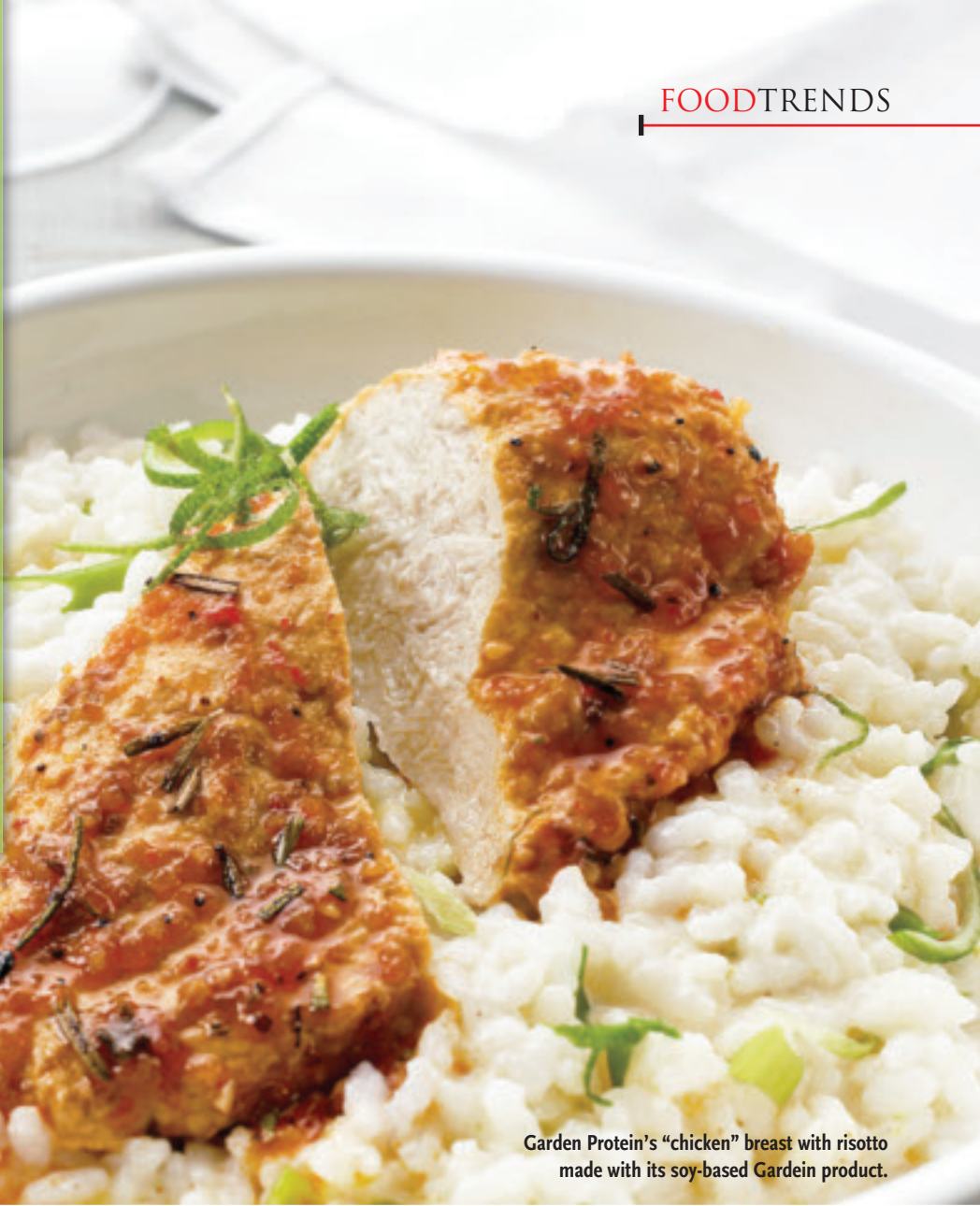


# THE SURGE IN SOY

Changing consumer attitudes towards this plant protein have made soy an increasingly popular product ingredient

By Valerie Ward



Garden Protein's "chicken" breast with risotto made with its soy-based Gardein product.

Fifteen years ago, the word soy conjured up images of bland squares of tofu and beverages with a beany aftertaste. Today soy enjoys a much more positive image. With new formulations and processing techniques, consumers can now enjoy decadent desserts, creamy beverages, and nutritious chicken and beef dishes – all made from soy, and all with good taste and texture. No longer limited to the vegetarian and lactose-intolerant markets, soy now appeals to a wider base of health-conscious customers.

While there are no figures showing exactly how much soy Canadians are consuming, the evidence suggests it's a food whose time has come. As products proliferate and quality improves, grocery chains are jumping on the bandwagon with their own brands of soy beverages, burgers and hot dogs. In the U.S., sales of soy foods rose from \$300 million to \$3.9 billion between 1992 and 2004. And according to a 2006 survey by the United Soybean Board, as many as 30 per cent of Americans consume soy foods or beverages

once a month.

The rise in consumption can be attributed to several factors, including greater interest among young people in plant-based foods, and the growth in North America of Asian populations for whom soy is often a dietary mainstay. Perhaps most significantly, baby boomers and other health-seekers have come to regard soy as a wise choice.

Recent studies show that soy provides a complete protein, with all the amino acids humans need for nutrition. In 1999, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration concluded that a diet containing 25 g or more of soy protein a day can lower blood cholesterol. Fortified soy beverages were added to the 2007 *Canada Food Guide* because Health Canada recognizes them as a nutritionally adequate alternative to milk. Health Canada further maintains that soy foods can be included as part of a healthy diet for children and adults. And while some studies have suggested soy foods may reduce the risk of cancer, prevent osteoporosis, and moderate symptoms of menopause, the scientific evidence is

inconclusive at this point.

One of many manufacturers riding the wave of interest in soy is Les Aliments SoYummi, a Quebec firm whose evolution illustrates changing consumer attitudes to the plant protein. Company founder and president Joanne Hollander originally developed SoYummi's product – flavoured organic soy mousse – in the 1980s as a nutritious snack for her lactose-intolerant son. “Back then, almost no one knew what soy was,” she says.

Encouraged by friends to bring her dessert concoction to a wider audience, Hollander conducted shelf-life tests and took samples to several Montreal-area dairy and wholesale distributors. “They all liked it, but asked why wasn't I doing this with dairy? I realized it was just too early for the product,” recalls Hollander. When soy milk hit the market in 1997, Hollander decided to try again. SoYummi mousse cups began appearing in Quebec Metro and IGA stores in 2002, targeting women in or approaching menopause. “The product was such a novelty,” recalls Hollander. “Not only was it a mousse made from organic whole soy, it was super-nutritious, with good taste and texture.”

In 2004, an infusion of capital and the marketing savvy of CEO Mackie Vadacchino helped fuel a 500-percent increase in sales, and won the product a presence in Ontario stores such as Whole Foods and the Big Carrot. That same year also saw the launch of SoYummi GoLite, a low-calorie version sweetened with prebiotic chicory syrup instead of sugar. “Given the wider acceptance of soy, and the interest in organic foods, we targeted a wider market,” explains Hollander. “SoYummi GoLite is popular with consumers age 25 and up, especially women in their 30s who are starting families and want to stay fit.”

With new products in the works, and ambitions to crack the northeastern U.S. market, Hollander says SoYummi is at a crossroads. “We'll either have to go very big or do a joint venture. The timing is right for soy,” she adds. “Years ago, the challenge was to mask the soy flavour with something else. Now we know that if you prepare soy without oxygen, it removes the bean flavour. The challenge today is to show consumers how good soy products can taste.”

Brendan Kelly, Marketing director for SoyaWorld Inc., agrees. The Vancouver-based company is one of North America's largest marketers of fresh, fortified soy beverages, including the SoGood, SoNice and Sunrise brands. But, he says, while the soy market continues to grow, soy beverage consumption has hit what he calls “a glass barrier.” Explains Kelly: “The flavour profile has improved significantly, but a recent survey shows that as many as 50 per cent of Canadians haven't had a soy beverage in five years. That suggests that they tried one at some point, didn't



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like it, and ruled it out based on that.” Kelly says SoyaWorld ensures great-tasting products through measures such as sourcing high-quality North American, non-GMO soybeans and soy protein isolates, and using cold, airless grinding and other processes to remove the beany notes.

While Kelly believes the *Canada Food Guide's* recognition of fortified soy beverages could help persuade customers to give soy a chance, SoyaWorld is actively pursuing other strategies. To broaden its customer base, it has launched products such as a low-calorie, fat-free beverage called So Good Trim, along with soy-based yogurts, ice creams and dessert cones, which Kelly says are selling well. They're also achieving success with shelf-stable, single-serving boxes of soy beverages. “This is a big growth product for

us that's building awareness of our fresh beverages,” he says, noting that the product is offered in a format that promotes family consumption. In May 2007, the company began rolling out a premium beverage in 946-mL plastic bottles. Available in three flavours, Kelly says the new formulation is richer, creamier and “will likely appeal most to single-user households or as a treat for heavier consumers of soy.”

Meat alternatives are another growth area, according to Richard Vann, vice-president of Corporate Development, Sales and Marketing at Garden Protein International (GPI). Founded in 2002, the thriving Richmond, B.C.-based firm uses IP non-GMO soy protein, wheat and vegetables, and slow-cooks them to make two cholesterol-free, low-fat meat alternatives. One has authentic beef taste and texture, the other chicken. GPI supplies the high-protein product, known as Gardein, to Morningstar Farms, a division of Kellogg Co., and to Loblaw's for one of its PC Blue Menu selections. Last fall, GPI launched It's All Good, a line of non-meat entrées that at press time was slated for full national distribution this summer. Featuring prepared dishes such as “chicken” with risotto and “turkey” with wild rice that can be heated in the microwave, the company is taking aim at the meal alternative market. “Consumers want more than a veggie burger they put in a bun,” says Vann. “They want more centre-of-the-plate food.”

The approach seems to be working. GPI doubled its capacity in 2006 and will expand again this year. “Soy products don't just appeal to vegetarians anymore,” says Vann. “They appeal to health-seekers who are more aware of the benefits of a plant-based diet with few saturated fats and cholesterol. We're also in an environment where more consumers want to know where their food comes from and how it's produced.” Finally, he says, “there will always be a market for meat, but there's more and more room for quality, good-tasting vegetable protein alternatives that are sustainably produced.” FC