

A Healthy Outlook for the Mainstream Free-From Category

12 Dec 2016 --- As the thinking around free from food products moves away from medical necessity into the mainstream and the growth of personalized nutrition picks up pace, manufacturers are creating better tailored products for specific sub-categories of individuals. In addition, more consumers are experimenting with free from products and specific diets like paleo and low FODMAP are strengthening the category. Going into 2017 the growth in free from foods is likely to continue, although at what pace? Will the hunger for healthier products continue to push this already sizeable segment?

Colum McLornan founder of Rule of Crumb, a specialist gluten-free foods business thinks so. Having scooped the Free From/Functional Food Expo's Innovation Award in 2015, he returned for a bigger and better event earlier this year to promote the company's portfolio covering breakfast, lunch, dinner and treat, for both retail and hospitality.

He tells **FoodIngredientsFirst**: "I started Rule of Crumb after spotting the potential for growth in the gluten free food market due to increased demand, and lack of choice in the market. Fast forward a few years and the UK and international market for free from is growing rapidly. In particular, we are seeing large growth in the Middle East as well as Europe. These are exciting times for the category as it continues to enjoy phenomenal growth."

The landscape of free from options continues to expand fueled by the growth in clean label, plant proteins and ancient grains. The category appeals to different consumer groups and new product developments, in a variety of segments, are coming thick and fast.

In August, American Key Food Products (AKFP) introduced a new brand of rice flours especially designed for excellent gluten-free baking in the US market. Technical Sales Director, Carter Foss, is buoyant the future of gluten free, bolstered by the ever increasing health conscious consumer base. In conversation with FoodIngredientsFirst he talked about whether or not the gluten free trend will slow down or is here to stay.

"We have asked a number of our customers who make gluten-free products about this and they all believe the gluten-free demand will remain strong,"

says Foss. "The growth rate could slow down, though, below the growth rates experienced a few years back. However, the emergence of paleo/AIP (auto-immune protocol)-friendly/grain-free diets, together with the high concern for healthy and good-for-you food products reinforce and help keep the demand for gluten-free products at these levels. It helps too that gluten-free products are getting better without having to be priced higher."

Free From in Retail & Special Diets Market

Retailers are helping to push more free from products into the mainstream by innovating their own brands. Sainsbury's has expanded its deliciously free from range with the launch of milk-free cheese in the UK - appealing to vegans, people with allergies and food intolerances - by swapping in coconut-based alternatives. The cheese alternatives include a cheddar style in both block and grates, Wensleydale-Style with cranberries, Greek-style as an alternative to feta, cheddar-style with caramelized onion and soft cheese-style with garlic and herb.

"We're really proud to launch the widest range of supermarket own brand cheese-alternatives to the UK, including a number of products that are first to market. These cheese-alternatives, alongside our broader Deliciously Freefrom offering, allow our shoppers to prepare meals and enjoy products that they may have previously missed out on," says Alexa Masterson, Sainsbury's product developer for Deliciously Freefrom.

Sainsbury's strategy is to make it more convenient for shoppers with food allergies or intolerances to complete their shop in one place - and more product developments with free from claims are likely for next year.

The fact that more people are being diagnosed, self-diagnosing and taking control of their personal nutrition on a daily basis also propels sales in various free from categories. The connection between food, lifestyle, nutrition and well-being has never been stronger and the special diets market is showing no sign of slowing down. There's also predictions that more people will either self-diagnose or be medically diagnosed with conditions, like coeliac disease, where searching for free from is a necessity, not just choice.

According to Coeliac UK, the disease affects at least one in 100 people in the UK and in Europe; however, only about 24 percent of people with the condition are clinically diagnosed. People medically diagnosed with coeliac disease can access some gluten-free staple foods on prescription as they need to follow a strict (and often expensive) gluten free diet.

Speaking to **FoodIngredientsFirst** Tony Goodman, CEO of Yumsh Snacks Ltd, who produce the award-winning Ten Acre premium hand cooked crisps and popcorn agrees personalized nutrition and special diets will continue to drive free from products.

"The 'Free From' category is growing at an exceptional speed for several reasons. Suppliers have realized that there are those that need to follow a special diet for medical reasons, such as coeliacs; and there are also the health conscious, who are opting to follow a 'Free From' diet as a lifestyle choice," he says.

"There is also a desire from the international market for British 'Free From' products. Our original business plan intended that we would start approaching the export markets from year 3 or 4, but the level of international interest that Ten Acre generated was so high, this timeline was brought forward and we started exporting at the end of our first year."

"Exporting can have a positive effect for your business. For Ten Acre, exporting helped spread the word about the importance of snacks having 'Free From Plus' credentials. So much more than 'Free From' – 'Free From Plus' means a product is great tasting as well as being gluten, dairy, MSG and GMO free, vegan, vegetarian, halal and kosher certified."

Free from dairy yes - free from indulgence no

According to recent Sainsbury's research, most long-for dishes for shoppers with allergies and intolerances are: pizza (82 percent), cheese board (77 percent), cheesecake (75 percent) and lasagne (73 percent). The cheese-alternatives, alongside other new Free from products, have been launched to help customers with food allergies and intolerances indulge in their favorite food in spite of dietary challenges.

Plant-based yogurt will continue to be a key new product development focus for dairy-free growth. As featured in Innova Market Insights 'New Favorites in Dairy Free' report, innovation in the dairy-free yogurt space will see new ingredients emerge, creating opportunities for other plant-based yogurts. And, a high percentage of consumers indicated that they think that the consumption of non-dairy yogurt is (very) good for their health.

On the indulgent front, one case in point of clever marketing for a new product is The Coconut Collaborative's line that promise to be free from dairy, soya, and gluten, but not temptation. Coconut and almond milk provide the base of their newest product. Cultures include *S. Thermophilus*, *L. Bulgaricus*, *Lactobacillus Acidophilus* and *Bifidobacterium Lactis*.

According to the Innova report: "Cheese is the next market category that will experience growth in product launches that are dairy-free. "The first dairy-free cheeses are available on the market, however, further improvements on the sensory quality of vegan cheese are expected, with attention to texture and function."

2017 Trends could Push Free From Further

Last month Innova Market insights also detailed its top trends for 2017; one of which is "Fuzzy Borders", where the most innovative products are being observed at the crossroads of different categories. Boundaries are blurring as innovators continue to capitalize on the potential of hybrid innovation and fusion which inspires completely new product groups and categories to arise, tempting the palate of the adventurous consumer.

Fuzzy Borders as a trend also comes into play by way of introducing more free from products to other consumer groups - you don't have to have a gluten or lactose intolerance, be vegan or anything else to tuck into free from food - it's appealing on many different levels.

'In Tune With my body' also featured in Innova's top trends for 2017 list. Consumers are increasingly making food choices based around what they think will make them feel better. They are experimenting with free from products and specific diets like paleo and low FODMAP. Industry is providing consumers with the opportunity to further personalize towards their perceived dietary needs. At the same time, they continue to increase their intake of foods and beverages with ingredients that they consider healthy, like protein and probiotics."

by Gaynor Selby