



Eating the East: The rapid Westernisation of the Asian diet

Ms Emily Tellers, product manager, Fabuless™³, explores this rapid Westernisation and discusses the emerging weight management market in this region

In 2004, China published the results of its first nutrition and health survey. The results were startling: The rate of obesity had increased by over 97% in just a decade¹. Three years later, the Health Ministry affirmed that urban Chinese boys aged 6 are 6cm taller and 3kg heavier than they were 30 years ago².

This can be attributed in part to the recent, huge fiscal growth in the region. China has enjoyed a decade of economic expansion and the emergence of a much more sedentary way of life. This trend can be observed across the whole of Asia. Convenience food is also a factor. Fundamentally seen as a Western dietary choice, processed, on-the-go food options have really taken hold in Asia, particularly with the rise in disposable income. But this new found affluence comes with a price.

Where malaria, typhoid and malnutrition were once the major risk factors, millions among the Asian population are now falling prey to diseases commonly associated with the West, such as diabetes, heart disease and strokes. A rise in the availability of saturated fat-, salt- and sugar-enriched products and consequent obesity issues are no doubt to blame. Weight management is therefore an increasingly pertinent topic. To counterbalance the alarming pattern of increased calorie intake and reduced physical activity, a market for weight management products has begun to flourish.

Urban decay

There are many possible reasons for the sudden escalation of obesity and related diseases across Asia – both physical and social.

Exercise is a well documented way to maintain good health and a balanced weight, and the Asian population spends a lot of time involved in physical activity. However, with greater urbanisation and the increase of Western commodities, there has been a marked decline in physical exertion – it is now more common for people to travel by car or public transport, and the traditional physical jobs have been replaced with machinery. This gives more opportunity for accumulating calories, rather than expending them.

In addition, the Asian diet in generations past seldom exceeded 2,000 calories a day. People would live on a diet of farmed food – mostly grains, rice and vegetables. There was very little saturated fat available, and meat and dairy products were considered a luxury.

Evidently, the growth of cheap and convenient fast food outlets across Asia provides people with a satisfying and altogether more indulgent food source. But the prevalence of fried food, sugary snacks and soft drinks results in an abrupt increase in calorie intake. Coupled with reduced exercise, this change in diet more than tips the balance.

All of these issues present a potentially worrying predicament for the future health of the Asian population.





Weight loss – profit gain

The challenge of weight management in Western countries has featured high on the agenda of international health matters for many years. A recent report states that obesity remains the key health issue for retailers and manufacturers to address, as it will affect a greater portion of the population than any other health issue to date⁴. Many have already harnessed this opportunity and the current value of the UK wellness foods market alone is estimated to reach £4 billion by 2011⁵.





With such a market well established in the West, this relatively new sector is now expanding at a similar pace in Asia to cater for demand from increasingly weight-conscious consumers. According to Chinese studies, it was worth 10 billion yuan (US \$1.25 billion) in 2004 and is expected to reach 60 billion yuan (approximately US\$8.8 billion) by 2010⁶. This signifies great profit potential for both domestic and international weight management product manufacturers.

The route to market in Asia is far removed from Western trade practices. While globalisation is progressively bridging the gap between East and West, suppliers and manufacturers must still fully understand the uniqueness of the Asian market if they wish to secure a strong market hold. This includes issues of culture, dietary preferences, appropriate brand positioning and a measured awareness of consumer needs.

Educating Asia

It is important to recognise that it would be irresponsible of manufacturers to exploit the growing market for weight management products in Asia, without also emphasising to this audience the need for a healthy, balanced diet, along with moderate exercise. Furthermore, drawing from Western experience, it is essential that the trend for yo-yo dieting does not catch on, and that consumers are only offered clinically proven solutions that will encourage sustained, healthy weight loss and general control over their food intake.

A Fabulesse proposition

Fabulesse, from DSM, is one such weight management ingredient. It offers manufacturers the chance to break into the Asian market and provide a responsible and clinically proven proposition.

Fabulesse contains a mixture of natural oat and palm oils, formulated into a stable emulsion. Its unique microstructure allows undigested fat to arrive at the ileum (the latter part of the small intestine), sending an “appetite satisfied” signal to the brain and making consumers feel full. This leads to better control

over calories longer term. Available as an emulsion, and in spray dried powder format, Fabulesse can be incorporated into a wide variety of Asian foodstuffs, including soups, sauces, beverages, yoghurts and meal replacement shakes.

A number of key retail concepts containing Fabulesse are already available in the Asia Pacific region. *SlimOne* is a 100% natural dietary supplement from Vietnamese company, Dong A Pharma. It has been specifically developed to support those looking to control their weight, helping them to feel fuller for longer. *Smart Conscious*, from Monage Co, is available online in Japan and claims to enable consumers to change their weight without altering diet patterns. Now available in Taiwan is *FrenchWise*, a dietary supplement which helps break the yo-yo diet effect, allowing consumers to eat less, in a safe and natural way.

With recent consumer research indicating a high purchase intent for Fabulesse-enriched products in the Asia Pacific region⁷, this ingredient seems well positioned for the market as it stands, and will hopefully encourage consumers to take a more responsible attitude to their food intake.

The “weight” is over

A far cry from the rural, exercise-reliant society that Asia once was, urbanisation and Westernisation of this continent through technology and industry have affected all aspects of the food chain – literally and metaphorically. Increased availability – and subsequent intake – of convenience foods has brought with it the burden of a number of fundamentally “Western” diseases.

With a growing consumer awareness of weight management across Asia, and of the products available to complement a healthy lifestyle, this area of the food and beverage market has attracted global competition. Fabulesse is one weight management ingredient that has successfully positioned and established itself. Demonstrating the utmost consideration for cultural preferences, and a strong consumer appeal, Fabulesse offers Asia a weighty proposition. **FBA**

References

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