The Cereals&Europe section of AACC International held its spring meeting, Consumer Driven Cereal Innovation: Where Science Meets Industry, in Montpellier, France, May 2–4, 2007. The meeting had nearly 300 participants and exhibits by 22 supplier companies.

In addition to the presentations and exhibits (discussed below), there were a number of awards presented during the meeting. Three awards sponsored by Danone were given as part of the 6th European Young Cereal Scientists and Technologists Workshop (see p. 278). The Puratos Great Taste and Wellness Awards were given to Michelle Moore, University College Cork, Ireland, and Anthony Fardet, INRA–Clermont-Ferrand/Theix, France.

The goals of the meeting were not only to share information, but also to try to form a common opinion. As the title suggests, the main subject dealt with cereal food innovation to meet the consumer needs for safe, healthy, and tasty foods. The program took a two-pronged approach to this issue, with one track focusing on science and another focusing on technology. One of the goals of the conference was to bring together industrial technologists and academic researchers. Attendance for the meeting was well distributed, with industry comprising approximately three-quarters of the attendees and academia and government accounting for the other quarter.

The meeting closed with a plenary session that summarized and discussed much of what had been presented. A number of important issues surfaced during the discussion, including increasing workplace collaboration, identifying and understanding the consumer, and upgrading the profile of cereal products. An outline of the session follows.

A New Marketplace

Rob Hamer, AACC International president, began the discussion by pointing out that there is a gap in today’s business environment between those trying to engineer better food products and the ones trying to distribute and sell those products.

“Science is becoming a much more multidisciplinary game, and that is a different form from what we are used to. We used to do much more monodisciplinary work, but the requirements of today, the requirements by the consumer, by the food industry, by the legislative organizations, require us to work together,” said Hamer.

Peter Ashby, Cereal Partners Worldwide, demonstrated this gap. He asked the audience members to raise their hands if their experiments were designed to fit the structure that would be required by the new European regulations to establish marketable health claims. Of all of the people in attendance, only two could make such a claim. The point of Ashby’s exercise was that for a group of people committed to creating food products, most of them were not thinking about what it would take for those products to reach the store shelves.

Hamer added to these sentiments. “People have different roles. The industry person has a different role from a person from science, who has a different role from a person from government. It is very important that we learn more and more to play our own roles in conjunction with the roles that others play,” said Hamer.

“A lot of us are working on issues that are related to nutrition, but have no knowledge about the specifics that you need to deliver in order to facilitate this type of legal registration.”

The solution, as pointed out, is greater collaboration between all of the parties. This is increasingly important in today’s world, where grain is being grown for more than just human consumption and where the industry has become so saturated with technology that the challenge now becomes finding a way to combine it all. While it is understandably rare for a scientist to bring food to the marketplace, it would be beneficial to at least understand the constraints under which the labeling side operates. Beyond just thinking about health claims, greater collaboration can also help developers avoid duplicated efforts and to accomplish the
complex task of launching a healthy cereal product. The group agreed, we must constantly ask ourselves, why are we doing this? What kind of criteria do we need to meet?

### Identifying and Understanding the Consumer

From this point the discussion naturally turned to the consumer. As an industry, we can create better products, but if the consumer doesn’t eat them, what’s the point? As Hamer stated, “Taste is king. If the consumer doesn’t eat it, it has no function at all.” “Health-related and nutrition-related questions have very much become a sensory issue,” said Kaisa Poutanen, VTT.

On one hand we have consumers who say they want healthier foods, but when the industry creates healthier foods, consumers don’t eat them. Whose fault is this? Some in the audience pointed out that the industry is willing to spend millions on the science to create a new product, but there is a gap with the assessment of the consumers’ desires and to find out the best ways to target those desires. How does the industry try to motivate the consumer to buy the products we want them to buy?

Or is this even the right question? Should the industry focus more on product change or on behavior change in the consumer? Some in the audience pointed out that occasionally you can modify a product, and it will affect the people you least want it to. Others indicated that it’s hard to make healthy products that are attractive to people in the lower socioeconomic classes who need them most.

Some favored the behavioral approach, indicating that what industry needs is more studies that indicate the long-term cost savings of eating healthy, both for the individual and the economy as a whole. Poutanen referenced a study that indicated diets high in fiber are actually less expensive than comparable low-fiber diets.

Above all, the group debated the identity of the consumer and whether it is even appropriate to use that term. For example, there are a number of products that target obesity and other specific health-related claims, but those types of consumers only make up a minority of the population. What can be said about the changing demographics of the consumer, such as the aging population?

From here, the discussion settled on the idea that, in a sense, there is no consumer. Averages don’t work. Consumers are made up of particular groups with particular wishes and needs. As Peter Ashby pointed out, “Imagine that you just walked into your local supermarket. Don’t look at the food you buy, look at the food you don’t buy. It’s most of them.” We each buy our own specific ingredients.

### Upgrading the Profile of Cereal Products

The discussion about the cereal foods industry frequently returned to an analogy first presented by Rob Hamer. Hamer described the cereal foods industry in terms comparable to the car industry, with many of the same type of goals. Both industries want to create safer and more environmentally friendly products, and both want to add value to their products. Safety is obviously a major component of cars. There are items on cars that are there for our protection. We may not even know about all of the engineering that went into making our car safer, but it has been done for our protection. In much the same way, consumers may not be aware of all of the engineering that has gone into their cereal foods, both to improve their taste and nutrition. The cereal foods world has become a high-technology industry, and it can be a challenge to keep track of all of the latest advances. We’re not just producing cars, we are producing race cars. A true racer will know everything about their car. Likewise, the cereals industry ultimately needs to be responsible for everything, from the raw materials we begin with, through all of the technology that we add to it, and on to the health-related claims we use to market it.

Needless to say, the meeting was declared a success. The AACC International Board of Directors has approved the concept for the next C&E Spring Meeting, and initial planning has begun for 2009.