Celebrate the Diversity of Bakery Products

I joined the cereals industry quite some time ago and very quickly became fascinated by the variety of bakery products that could be produced from wheat flour. Historically, it has been the ingenuity of the baker in exploiting the versatility of wheat and other grains that has led to the development of the bewildering array of baked good that we see today. Marie Antoinette was quick to recognize the diversity of baked products when she commented that if the people did not have bread to eat then “they should eat brioche [cake].” Unfortunately, her position in French society was not equipped to understand local social issues and she paid a very high price for her ignorance of the nature of the baking industry.

In the last 100 years or so, science has helped us to better understand the contributions that cereals and cereal-based products can make to our diet and healthiness. As the skills of bakers became progressively combined with the knowledge of cereal scientists, the diversity of baked products increased. However, in more recent times in some social circles, the “finger of admonition” has pointed at the negative contributions of baked products to the so-called diseases of western civilization—obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, and the list seems to increase daily. We are constantly bombarded with cries of “too much salt,” “too many calories,” “too much fat,” and “too much sugar.” It’s getting to the stage where I expect to see bakers consigned to the stocks where they will be pelted with unpleasant food items (and worse) for selling unhealthy food. In the past, bakers were most likely to end up in the stocks for selling underweight or adulterated bread. Unlike today, the nature of past adulterations could be very seriously damaging to human health with a number of recorded instances when people did indeed die because of improper activities of millers and bakers.

Why the Criticism?

The position today is very different in that much of the manufacture of bakery products is undertaken in hygienic and carefully controlled conditions. After all, it is in no baker’s interest to kill off their customers since you tend not to get repeat sales. Despite our best efforts as an industry, we still face much criticism with respect to our contribution to the modern diet and lifestyle. In response to the waves of negative criticism over the years, bakers have developed whole ranges of products with “improved” nutritional and dietetic benefits.

In the United Kingdom, bakers have progressively lowered salt levels to make positive contributions to concerns over blood pressure and such mitigation strategies are being discussed and adopted in other parts of the world. In the case of the United Kingdom, the reduction in salt levels has been more than 40% since the first moves were made in the 1980s. Despite this staggering change in bread, the level of urinary salt in U.K. studies have barely fallen by 10%, which leads one to speculate about the true relationship between salt in bread and its contribution to U.K. diets (and U.K. consumers’ eating habits). Nevertheless, U.K. bakers have adopted the right social attitude and made the appropriate changes. As I have said before in this column and other public forums, it is a pity that they have not been given greater credit for what they have achieved.

Many bakery products have significantly lower sugar and fat contents than when I joined the industry. In the case of fat, there has also been a major change in the sources and types of fat being used. The implementation of such changes has largely been a response by the bakers to consumer feedback; in few cases, has it been necessary for legislation to be introduced to “force” bakers to make changes.

The production and consumption of higher-fiber products has also increased significantly in the past few years as consumers appreciate the benefits of increasing fiber in their diets. Baking technology has been able to overcome some of the negative sensory properties associated with so-called healthy bakery products. When I joined the industry, whole grain loaves were dense and firm eating and it was like taking medicine; they didn’t look good or taste appetizing but you assumed that it was doing you good all the same. Combining improved sensory properties of whole grain breads with effective promotion of their health benefits has undoubtedly contributed to their increased consumption and that has to be good news for everyone, not least for consumers. Finding and using less-visible fibers has become an effective way of increasing bread fiber levels with appeal for younger consumers who are reported to have an aversion to “dark bits” in their chosen breads.

Health-Related Claims

A big problem for bakers, especially in the European Union, is the difficulty with making health-related claims. It is perfectly reasonable that the consumer should be protected from bogus claims associated with products that are going to deliver “health benefits.” But what I have difficulty getting my head around are situations such as calcium fortification of white flours in the United Kingdom. The fortification is mandatory but the bakers are not allowed to make any claims regarding the addition of it, iron, and B vitamins. At the same time the anti-E number lobby is allowed to pillory bread for the “long list of artificial additives which millers and bakers use,” commonly citing calcium carbonate and adding that it comes from “chalk and old bones.” No direct link between old bones and bread is made and the readers are left to come to their own conclusions. It’s a bit of a one-sided position if you ask me, when the government insists

Stanley P. Cauvain
BakeTran
High Wycombe, U.K.
that calcium carbonate is added but does little or nothing in supporting bakers to send out positive messages about baked products.

The whole grain/health grain message is a powerful one and shows the potential contribution of good “branding” of bakery foods. Whenever I think of marketing messages and branding, I cast my mind back to when our focus in the United Kingdom was first drawn to the dangers of saturated fat. These was an advertisement from the U.K. Milk Marketing Board focused on dairy cream; the slogan was “Naughty but Nice” and featured various U.K. TV and film celebrities casting covetous eyes and lips on succulent dairy cream cakes. As a result of the marketing push, dairy cream production and sales increased, at a time when the cry was “down with saturated and animal fats.”

So come on folks, let’s get out there and celebrate the diversity of bakery products and deliver some positive messages about baked products. Want basic nutrition? We’ve got it! Want healthy eating? We’ve got it! Want indulgence? We’ve got it (but in moderation please)!

Well, after all the hard work writing this column, I need an energy boost; now let me see is it going to be the high-fiber, low-everything health bar or a piece of that creamy gateaux—what should I have?

Stanley P. Cauvain is the director and vice president of R&D activities at BakeTran. He is also the former president (2004–2006) of the International Association for Cereal Science & Technology (ICC). Currently, Cauvain is a fellow of the ICC Academy and joint editor-in-chief of Quality Assurance and Safety of Crops & Foods, the official journal of ICC, in cooperation with MoniQA. AACC Intl. member Cauvain can be reached at spc@baketran.demon.co.uk.