



Peter Wynn Thompson for The New York Times

A booth at the convention of food technologists in Chicago this week offered tastes of açai water, made from the berrylike fruit of a Brazilian palm.

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The ingredient maker P. L. Thomas of New Jersey featured food to enhance health and well-being.

On display were aisle upon aisle of foods made to do more than provide basic nutrition. There was one kind of yogurt to lower cholesterol and another to curb appetite. Cheese cubes supposedly increased energy and

strengthened the immune system. Desserts were laced with heart-healthy fish oil, and a pomegranate-flavored water contained fiber to promote digestive health.

Paul M. Flowerman, president of P. L. Thomas, a food ingredient company based in Morristown, N.J., showed a suggested menu of life-enhancing foods, starting with a mixed green salad with antioxidant vinaigrette made from pomegranates, grape-seed extract and açai (pronounced ah-SIGH-ee), which is the berrylike fruit of a Brazilian palm. There was also sushi concocted from fish paste colored by lycopene and green-tea infused rice, and brownies with phosphatidylserine, a chemical compound that is said to enhance memory.

“The whole paradigm in our society has been based on prescription pharmaceuticals,” Mr. Flowerman said. Now, he said, “food can also be available for enhancing health and wellness.”

The convention of food scientists includes four days of technical talks on topics like “determination of cucumber pickle firmness using contact-ultrasound technology,” and a vast food expo that provides a glimpse of what may be available on grocery shelves in the near future.

What was apparent was not only the emphasis on health-promoting ingredients but also the growing importance of China as a food ingredient supplier — even as its products have come under increased scrutiny amid reports of contaminated seafood, pet food ingredients and toothpaste. Several vendors in the China pavilion said customers had questioned them about the problems, but that business had not suffered.

“It’s not our problem,” said Xi Chen, manager of the food department at the Jiangsu High Hope International Group Tong Yuan Import and Export Company. But he noted that food inspections by the Chinese government had tightened recently.

The primary talk of the convention was not China, however, but what might be the next big thing in a market where some so-called functional foods — like energy drinks and probiotics, or products containing beneficial bacteria — have already become runaway hits.

At a panel discussion on Monday, executives from [Kraft Foods](#), [Campbell Soup](#), [Nestlé](#) and [General Mills](#) said they were reworking their brands to make them healthier.

The challenge is in doing so without ruining the taste, and many vendors at the convention were offering alternatives for fat, sugar and salt.

“It has the same taste profile,” said Hanneke M. Veldhuis, business manager for flavor innovation at the Dutch firm DSM Food Specialties, as she offered samples of cake with less fat. “If you want to have your indulgent product throughout the day, you can do it without the guilt.”

But not everyone is convinced that many of the functional foods will be successful. Harvey Hartman, founder and chief executive of the Hartman Group, a food market research firm based in Bellevue, Wash., said consumers were moving away from industrialized foods toward those that were less processed. So where açai berry drinks might be successful, he says he doubts consumers will lap up soft drinks spiked with vitamins.

“People are saying, ‘I want my food to be food. I want my medicine to be medicine. I don’t want my food to be medicine,’ ” he said.

While it's difficult to say what new products will resonate with consumers, there was no shortage of predictions about what ingredient or product would become a sales sensation, the pomegranate juice of 2008.

Will probiotics be supplemented by prebiotics (nondigestible ingredients that promote the growth of healthy bacteria in the intestine)? Or will it be coenzyme Q10, known as CoQ10 (a vitaminlike substance that is said to enhance stamina)?

American Fruit Processors of California championed the goji berry, açai and mangosteen as superantioxidants. Van Drunen Farms, of Momence, Ill., a producer of freeze-dried vegetable, fruit and herb products, promoted its FutureCeuticals line, including coffee berries — the entire fruit of the coffee tree, not just the bean — which it called “the ingredient that has it all.”

Kit Kats, a saleswoman for FutureCeuticals, said the company's coffee berry products were not yet widely available, “but there's a lot of interest.”

A handful of products had the sort of gee-whiz appeal of a winning science fair project.

Sarah L. O'Neil, director of marketing at the Swiss chocolate maker Barry Callebaut, says her company's aerated chocolate melts faster in the mouth and has fewer calories because, as its description suggests, it is filled with tiny air bubbles.

Ali Yeni, general manager of the Turkish firm Hleks, said his company had improved on the technology that made Pop Rocks possible with its own Shoogy Boom popping candy. “Ours are larger cells than Pop Rocks,” Mr. Yeni said, explaining that both used encapsulated carbon dioxide. “Theirs are steady — pop, pop, pop. Ours go up and down.”

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