

How to keep the

Square apples may not be the health cure of 2020, but NPD experts are predicting further growth of functional foods and this time, it's personal. Sarah Britton reports

Man's eating habits have come a long way from the days of the hunter gatherer. Now, the closest consumers get to their ancestors is foraging for berries in Tesco's fruit aisle. Pretty advanced you might think, but not according to new product development (NPD) experts, many of whom are certain that 2020 will see a healthy eating revolution.

Suzanne Durie, founder of NPD consultancy Extra Brain, is convinced that healthy products are the only way forward. "We don't have any choice as a society but to eat healthier, because we are eating ourselves sick and we aren't able to afford the health bills. I think we're going to have a problem with the health service buckling at its knees," she says.

But a 'one size fits all' approach isn't going to cut the mustard. "By 2020 there will be a huge retired population and a lot of people living on their own and they'll need the right kinds of food. Many old people have small appetites, but still need all the nutrients, so there's an opportunity for new, specialised products, not baby food," she says.

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—Angela Mitton, Beetroot and Orange

Functional ingredients will meet the need for personalised nutrition, says Angela Mitton, who heads up NPD consultancy Beetroot and Orange. "It's taken a long time for functional foods to break through, but in 2020 people will want products that tick all the boxes. For example, there'll be products for specific genders, ages and health conditions," she claims.

"Trust in processed food is being eroded. People want cast iron facts instead of wishy-

washy 'health' and 'well-being' claims," she adds.

However, Mintel's Global New Products Database director David Jago warns that making specific health claims will be extremely challenging. The future of functional foods will depend on the Nutrition and Health Claims Regulation, he says. "NPD is being held back and there's a degree of hesitancy from some companies." He feels that while some smaller firms will be able to slip under the red tape, the big boys will become the victims of their own success.

"There will always be loopholes, but it's getting harder [to make claims]. The Unilevers, the Danones and the Nestlés won't be able to risk it any more. It's like sticking your head above ground and being shot at."

He predicts that the only way major manufacturers can progress with functional foods will be to make sure that science is on their side. "Branded players will get in to bed with ingredients firms – they will have tighter relationships," he says.



Back to the future

Analysing past innovations is a useful way of working out what the future holds, says Jonathan Banks, business insight director at AC Nielsen. "Twenty years ago I can remember Danone showing me their bio-yoghurts and I didn't understand them," he says.

Today, he notes, many consumers eat functional foods, but now the focus has shifted to taste because people refuse to substitute flavour for health benefits. "People used to drink Yakult on the basis that if it doesn't taste great, it must be doing you good, but it has been eclipsed by Müller Vitality," he says.

He believes that taste will play a key role in future NPD and can already see gaps in today's

doctor away ...



Jonathan Banks: GM is an area where we'll become less squeamish

market, which will have been addressed by 2020. "Now we have Unilever Vie [a drink which provides half the daily fruit and veg allowance in one shot], but for a lot of people it doesn't taste nice."

Charles Banks, director of food consultancy The Food People, also expects the emphasis on taste to grow. "Consumer panels will be more representative of people's buying and dining habits. There'll be more accompanied shopping, because in a sterile environment, where people don't have to part with their money, you often get inaccurate results," he says.

When testing new products in the future, consumers may be able to put on a pair of

goggles and a helmet and go 'virtual shopping' in a computer-generated supermarket, he predicts.

Mitton can also see room for improvement where taste testing is concerned: "I don't believe you can get rid of human involvement in taste testing, but subjectivity will minimise as sensory profiling improves. Companies will certainly give panels more training – it won't just be people pulled off the factory floor."

She also believes that pressure from retailers to get new products out on the shelves more quickly means good news for freelance consultants. "I think there could be a lot more business coming my way. In order to get products out on time, NPD will be outsourced to specialists in the field," she says.

Charles Banks is equally hopeful that firms will be banging on his door in 2020: "My company only exists because manufacturers are running out of time and people have to outsource. Everyone's searching for the Holy Grail – the next Mars Bar or Pot Noodle. But no matter how big a firm's NPD team is, processors will still be into delivering NPD on a daily basis and won't have time to look around restaurants and abroad."

He is already aware of a new overseas influence that will be mainstream by 2020. "The relaxing of the EU borders will mean the introduction of Eastern European-influenced dishes, purely because consumer demand is there. Polish delis will set up, so when retailers go on innovation trips they'll pick up on this and we'll see Slovakian and Polish inspired ready meals and prepared foods."

Colin Lynn, product development director at Global Group Trading, shares his vision: "There'll be an influx of foreigners, and they're going to bring their food with them. Retailers will stock up to accommodate the new workforce."

However, he draws the line at anything too dramatic. "I don't think we'll ever eat witchetty grubs or kangaroo backsides as part of our mainstream diet, but look at sushi: people wouldn't have accepted that years ago – they'd think it wasn't cooked properly. We've already adopted Italian food, so we'll probably adopt our favourite ethnic dishes."

Weird science

Lynn also thinks that manufacturers will welcome more technologists into NPD teams. "Development will become more in depth – chefs working with scientists. Look at Heston Blumenthal – why not have more food

scientists working on NPD?"

But while development experts are ready to leap ahead, The Food People thinks that consumers may slow the process. "By 2020 people will be prepared to have apples bred or grown in a certain way, but when it comes to flat carrots that chop easier, I'm not so sure. Saying that, you don't find bendy cucumbers any more – they're all straight – so maybe by 2050 we'll see more processed, but 'natural' foods," says Banks.

"Genetic modification (GM) is an area where we'll become a little less squeamish," predicts

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– Suzanne Durie, Extra Brain

AC Nielsen's Banks. "A lot of the reason why we're in the mess we're in at the moment is because people don't understand the science. Education is beginning to get better, though, and in the future we'll start to see GM products with functional benefits."

Not everyone is a fan of scientific innovation though. "Currently, many people only want fresh ingredients and food that eases their conscience – that's a trend that is growing and by 2020 it might become mainstream," says Durie.

"In the eighties, when you went to a restaurant it was all about going out and also what the food looked like on the plate. In the nineties, people were turning away from the falseness of the eighties – the fake hair, the fake shoulders etc. By 2020 we could be eating Heston Blumenthal's leather ice cream, but I think we'll be more earthy," she says.

Charles Banks also thinks people will associate nature with goodness. "Regional, seasonal and local foods will grow in popularity as consumers will be more aware of local issues such as employment, preservation of heritage and also food miles," he says. "Perhaps at the moment, environment is further down the list of priorities, but by 2020 it will be jostling with price for the top spot."

The truth is that no one knows what the future holds. But be it environmental, health or ethnic trends leading the way in 2020, the future of NPD is by no means square.