

TALKING SENSE in a POST-FACT world



THE European Snacks Association has hit the ground running in 2017, working at full speed to generate and maintain our sector's reputation among political decision makers, as well as informing the legislative process with evidence-based, technically sound advice. Sebastian Emig considers what's in store

WHAT is in the pipeline for our industry this year? In order to answer this, we have to look at the broader societal changes going on around us.

There is ongoing economic fragility, there are disruptive forces at work in many of our political systems and there is a continuing influx of refugees, which enriches our society culturally yet stirs up strong arguments. In times of zero (or even negative) interest rates, do you buy a new smartphone or gamble your money on the stock market, rather than letting it linger unproductively on your bank account? In times of fake news and the shift towards the 'emotionalisation' of political debates, do you take the time to check that your sources of information are legit, or do you remain in your bubble and 'go with the flow'?

While it may seem something of a stretch to link such huge social factors directly to snacking habits, they can all impact on the daily lives of individuals and their consumption behaviour.

At a time of great perceived change, many of us are looking for an anchor or something that generates a feeling of security. I think this is an opportunity for our sector. On the one hand, we may use snacks to create a feeling of homeliness to cocoon us and shut out the 'noise' with a few moments of indulgence. On the other, we can celebrate the tide of change and try out new and daring products, flavours and textures.

Zooming in closer to look at how food is being regarded, one realises that the power and meaning that people invest in food has shifted tremendously in the past few years. Before, food was often considered merely as 'fuel for keeping the engine running'. Nowadays

food is a placeholder in debates from many different angles. It may be a status symbol or a way to express your personality - you can buy plates fitted with smartphone holders that allow you to take the perfect picture of your dish for social media.

Food can even be medicine, with a vast amount of interesting research into personalised nutrition just beginning to unravel which foods promote the right bacterial populations to keep the immune system functioning properly, for instance. On the other hand, there's a danger in the tendency to think that the latest 'superfoods' hold the magic key to a healthy life. This kind of thinking can lead to so-called 'moral licensing', in which one allows oneself to indulge after doing something positive. So, for example, choosing to drink a diet soda with a cheeseburger may mean you subconsciously discount the burger's caloric and cholesterol content.

Many consumers are torn between their love of indulgence and a puritanical belief that one should only eat what is 'clean', environmentally friendly, low-carbon, plant-based and so on. People tend to swing back and forth between these two extremes and, in my opinion, both eating attitudes will continue to co-exist. But my hope is that more people will respond to the 'middle way' message that a moderate amount of indulgence can be integrated into a healthy and balanced diet.

This increasing confluence of food and health has already reached our sector and will pick up speed in 2017. New raw materials, novel production techniques and messaging about the health and nutrition of our products will all allow our sector to ride the wave of

cleaner eating. That's only possible thanks to the ongoing investments by our members, who are working hard to further improve consumers' diets.

PEANUTS - A SMALL NUT SHAKES THE SAVOURY SNACKS WORLD

IT is widely recognised that regular consumption of nuts can form part of a healthy, balanced diet and many ESA members have high stakes in the nuts business. An issue has arisen about the potential re-classification of blanched peanuts by the World Customs Organisation (WCO). It was quite a surprise. Thankfully it was flagged up by two of our members, because the ESA Secretariat usually does not cover customs- or even trade-related issues. However we are happy to go the extra mile and cover topics outside our usual remit and we want to thank our members for spotting the problem.

In a nutshell - pun intended - blanched peanuts are currently considered as 'raw' when imported into the European Union but they may be reclassified as 'processed'. Besides the terminology change, the impact of such reclassification would be severe from the trade perspective.

The EU is an important market for peanuts, with around 90% of total peanut imports to the EU originating in Argentina, the USA, China and Brazil. The proposed change - if approved by the Council of the WCO - would increase the current zero duty rate to a duty rate of 11.2%. Along with other interested parties, we were astonished to hear that the decision to make this change has already been taken at technical level.

The ESA Secretariat drummed up its

members as well as like-minded trade associations to collect arguments based on factual information in order to provide evidence against a final decision at the political level. We argued that the WCO proposal would not affect the character, durability or use of the peanut. It is only the tariff that would change. It would result in unnecessary inflationary costs and subsequent losses to business, as well as seriously disadvantaging the consumer.

Similar to our action on the fosetyl dossier (see *TSM*, Winter 2015), the ESA Secretariat was paramount in preparing and implementing an outreach plan to the European Commission and concerned countries to inform the decision making process.

For the time being we can show our members modest positive results. The European Union and Argentina decided to enter reservations to this decision, and Australia and Brazil have submitted reservations. The next step is to create a dedicated electronic working group for members to provide their technical expertise. This should be up and running by the time *TSM* is published. We will use this to support the EU reservation. Finally, we will try to get a technical meeting with the WCO secretariat sometime in March to further hammer home our arguments.

HERE WE GO AGAIN: ACRYLAMIDE

IN recent months the Secretariat has worked tirelessly together with FoodDrinkEurope in order to explain the benefits of the mandatory Codes of Practice (CoP) that are intended to be the practical extension of the toolbox approach

to acrylamide mitigation. These CoP are expected to form the core of the related draft regulation.

The CoP will further broaden understanding of the issue and promote innovation of potential tools for mitigation, which will result in the progressive reduction of acrylamide across the entire European food supply. Businesses will be required to demonstrate compliance with the regulation, which includes applying the relevant CoP, and authorities will be able to ask food manufacturers for records of acrylamide mitigation activities in order to verify compliance. Non-compliance will generate penalties and will be handled on the basis of national legislation.

This proposal is broadly supported by the European Commission and industry is now working to make sure that Members of the European Parliament are fully informed, since the dossier is now up for discussion in the Parliament.

So far, so sensible. However, in recent months there have been some distressing voices that are trying to divert the debate about acrylamide into a less scientific and less rational direction. There are some new (NGO) kids on the block and they do make some noise.

Noise is mostly all it is, we must say, after observing their so-called arguments and communication behaviour in the Brussels bubble. Fortunately, rational decision-makers don't usually allow themselves to get led astray by these loud but groundless voices, so these 21st century sirens will either need to up their game in terms of providing hard evidence or they will disappear as quickly from the stage as they appeared. The parties providing the funding behind them will hardly be pleased when no success can be shown for all their investment.

SNACKEX IS BIGGER AND BETTER

MANY of you will remember our last SNACKEX in Istanbul and how successful it was for exhibitors and delegates in terms of networking, business-making and information-sharing. Well get ready to be positively surprised: this year's SNACKEX in Vienna has already at the time of writing attracted 43 more exhibitors, has 12 more countries participating and has sold 37% more stand space than the 2015 event. Those figures are bound to increase in the coming months. And for the very first time ever: WE HAVE SOLD ALL EXHIBITION STANDS! I can only encourage you to come along and be part of this great event in order to make it even bigger and better.

GRATITUDE AND OUTLOOK

After a tremendous 2016 - in terms of regulatory activities, reputation and visibility, my team and I want to thank you, dear member, for your great support. With your ongoing help we are confident that whatever 2017 throws at us, we will tackle and overcome it in order to further protect your interests and promote the European savoury snacks sector.



Director General Sebastian Emig*

*in his capacity as permanent representative of PrimeConsulting BXLBCN SL



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