

The many tastes of tortillas

Demand for tortilla-based products is on the rise

When it comes to the grain-based foods industry, the tortilla is on the move. Available in a range of shapes, sizes and flour types, tortillas may be found in the refrigerated section of the grocery store, in the fresh bakery/deli section, or even in the snack aisle in the form of tortilla chips.

One thing that is apparent regardless of their form is that tortilla-based products are in demand. In the 52 weeks ended Sept. 6, dollar sales of hard/soft tortillas/taco kits rose 6% to \$1,243,521,000 on a 4% gain in unit sales to 570,619,400, according to Information Resources, Inc., Chicago. Meanwhile, refrigerated tortillas totaled \$337,286,600, up 4.5% from the same period a year earlier.

Chicago-based Mintel International Group Ltd. expects dollar sales of tortilla chips to total \$2,452 million in 2009, which would be up 10% from sales of \$2,223 million in 2008. That growth is expected to continue at around 4% per year, making the tortilla chip category a \$3 billion segment by 2014, according to Mintel.

The reasons for tortillas' growth are manifold, but are driven in large part to the growing Hispanic population in the United States. As companies and food service outlets try to deliver to this demographic the broader U.S. population has become exposed to wraps and tortilla menu items — and the statistics show they like them.

Tortillas for health

The largest provider of refrigerated tortillas in the United

States with sales of nearly \$200 million is Mission Foods Inc., Irving, Texas. Last November, the company introduced Life Balance Tortillas fortified with calcium and vitamins. The tortillas are enriched with 23 vitamins and minerals, including life'sDHA, a vegetarian source of the omega-3 fatty acid, DHA.

Alberto Gonzalez, senior vice-president of Mission Foods, said the products have performed well to date and have achieved their goal of capturing shifting consumer attitudes about health and nutrition.

"Mission Foods' newest healthy tortilla line extension in the Mission Plus! product line has been very well received in the market," Mr. Gonzalez said. "Available in flour and whole wheat, Life Balance entered the market at a time when health-conscious consumers or those seeking gourmet options were searching for a way to integrate a nutritious, versatile bread alternative that fit the needs of the whole family. There has been an upward trend in sales and distribution of Life Balance, and it continues to grow in major retailers across the United States, including Wal-Mart, Safeway, Kroger, Target and Supervalu."

Mr. Gonzalez added that Mission Foods' commitment to offering healthy meal solutions, coupled with the Life Balance line's success, has the company strongly considering increasing the product line in the future.

In line with the product launch, Mission Foods partnered with family health and fitness expert Andrea Metcalf to provide consumers with nutritional counseling, exercise tips, motivation and information that will help create a more balanced life.

Niche companies playing larger role

La Tortilla Factory, Santa Rosa, Calif., is a smaller player in the tortillas category, but the company hopes a line extension capturing several health trends will grow sales going forward. The company earlier this month introduced a line of tortillas under the Smart & Delicious brand that cater to consumers demand for healthier bread and tortilla options.

The 100 Calorie Tortillas — available in traditional and 100% whole wheat — feature 100 calories, 8 grams of fiber, 1.5 grams of fat and omega-3-rich flax seeds, according to La Tortilla. In addition, the tortillas have no hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated oils. The whole wheat variety has 20 grams of whole grains.

"Company research indicates our new 100 Calorie Tortillas will be an everyday consumer favorite, as well as



an ideal 'Diet Season Kick-Off' merchandising opportunity for retailers," said Jan Remak, executive director of sales and marketing for La Tortilla Factory. "All food companies know their products must pass the consumer taste test to succeed in the marketplace. But, we also know that consumers are more conscious about eating food to fuel their bodies while achieving or maintaining their ideal weight. It only makes sense that we continue to develop new products that never sacrifice taste, but are nutrient-rich, calorie-conscious and contain added beneficial fiber and omega-3s."

Another small player making a mark is MexAmerica Foods, L.L.C. The St. Mary's, Pa.-based company this spring launched a line of all-natural tortillas and wraps with a guaranteed 90-day shelf life.

"Many tortilla manufacturers have all-natural formulations, but MexAmerica is the first to develop a dough recipe that yields a product that will remain fresh and mold free in refrigeration for up to 90 days," said Joe Riley, president and chief executive officer of MexAmerica. "Diversity in the tortilla industry is key. You can't skate by with only one great product, and that's why we offer many varieties of traditional tortillas and wraps."

The new tortillas and wraps are available in 8-inch fajita/quesadilla size, and 10-inch wrap/burrito size in both traditional white flour or honey whole wheat flavors. The company also offers a 12-inch all-natural wrap for food service providers. MEN

— Eric Schroeder

