

Putting

# salt in its place

FOOD PRODUCERS ARE TURNING TO REFORMULATION AND SALT REPLACERS TO VOLUNTARILY CUT SODIUM FROM THEIR PRODUCTS, BEFORE IT BECOMES MANDATORY

BY TREENA HEIN

**H**ealth Canada is serious about salt — reducing the amount consumed by Canadians, that is. Last February, the agency began releasing label data and draft sodium targets for many foods, with more products being added to the list all the time. And in partnership with the food industry, Health Canada is also helping consumers make healthier choices through the launch of the Nutrition Facts Education Campaign.

Brian Nickerson, R&D manager at Oakville, Ont.-based Continental Ingredients Canada, believes that while many companies aren't happy with such a close look at the salt content of food products, they are accepting that change is here. "The trouble with these targets however," says Nickerson, "is that the serving sizes in some cases haven't been updated in 30 years. They're much too small."

### Reformulation woes

Although some food companies have already reduced salt in their products — voluntarily complying with targets that may become law in the future — others are still in the early stages. This is partly because from a product development perspective, achieving a great-tasting, lower-salt product is often easier said than done. "Understanding the interaction of all the ingredients in the product is a must, and at times extremely difficult," explains Nickerson. "Trial and error is often the only way to reformulate many products, a tricky process that can sometimes go on for years."



Cost, reformulation issues and marketing concerns are reasons processors may be slow to reduce sodium in their products.

Calla Farn agrees that the process is not always easy or straightforward. “In addition to providing flavour, salt can be a functional ingredient,” says the vice-president of Government/Public Relations and Corporate Affairs at Florenceville, N.B.-based McCain Foods Canada. “For example, in baked goods and pizza, salt is used as a leavening agent, while in other products it is used as a preservative to help maintain shelf life. So sometimes we can simply reduce the salt, but often we also have to change spice ratios to make sure the product still tastes as good as, or better than, the original version. Reducing salt can also change the texture of products such as cakes.” McCain Foods does not currently use salt substitutes or flavour enhancers when reducing sodium. In fact, as part of its “McCain It’s All Good” initiative, the company is combining efforts to use no unfamiliar or artificial ingredients with sodium reduction.

The fact that existing salt alternatives may not fill all of the functional roles of salt is recognized in the July 2010 Canada’s Sodium Working Group (SWG) report. The SWG was created in 2007 at the behest of the Health minister to develop and oversee the implementation of a

population health strategy for reducing sodium intake among Canadians. “[Replacers] can also be many times the cost of salt,” the report states. “A food processor must identify the role that salt is playing in the food, select from possible options for reducing or replacing it wholly or in part, and test the reformulated product for microbial food safety, shelf life stability and consumer acceptance. It may need to consider the fact that salt substitutes, identified in ingredient lists, are less familiar to consumers. Finally, while food additives are subject to a scientific safety assessment prior to being authorized for use in Canada, there may be limits as to how extensively they can be used because of their particular safety profiles.”

### Replacement alternatives

The good news is that most ingredient companies now offer products that allow Canadian food manufacturers



Low-So Salt Replacer from Malabar Super Spice can be used on a 1:1 basis to replace up to half the sodium in products.

to cut substantial amounts of sodium while delivering much of the same functionality and taste. One of these is Danisco’s Salt Pro Flex, a salt-receptor enhancer that’s a natural version of the company’s SaltPro line. “The customer would add 0.2 per cent to 0.5 per cent of the product depending on the amount of sodium reduction desired,” says Tom Rourke, senior Business Development manager at Danisco USA Inc.

Low-So Salt Replacer from Burlington, Ont.-based Malabar Super Spice Co. is another available salt substitute. It functions

like regular salt, and can be used on a 1:1 basis to replace up to half the sodium in products — especially meat and cheese products — with no discernable difference in taste. “Low-So Salt Replacer is a potassium chloride product that has been uniquely processed to remove bitterness,” says Malabar president Doris Valade. “No flavour

maskers are required.” Potassium chloride performs more like salt than any other substitute can, she notes, and it’s also a healthy additive in that potassium is an important nutrient in the diet.

Savory Systems International, Inc. of Branchburg, N.J. offers a number of salt replacement options to Canadian

companies, all yeast extract-based. “Typically, our products can be used to replace up to approximately 30 per cent of salt,” says Marketing manager Jackie Gebhart. “The naturally existing levels of nucleotides work as enhancers to round out flavours and increase the perception of salt.”

Meanwhile, Wisconsin-based Main Street Ingredients, now owned by dairy co-op Agropur, offers three salt replacement systems. “Soda-Lo 30 tastes better and is more natural than conventional salt,” says Guy Bouthillier, director of New Business. Made from sea salt, Soda-Lo 30’s smaller



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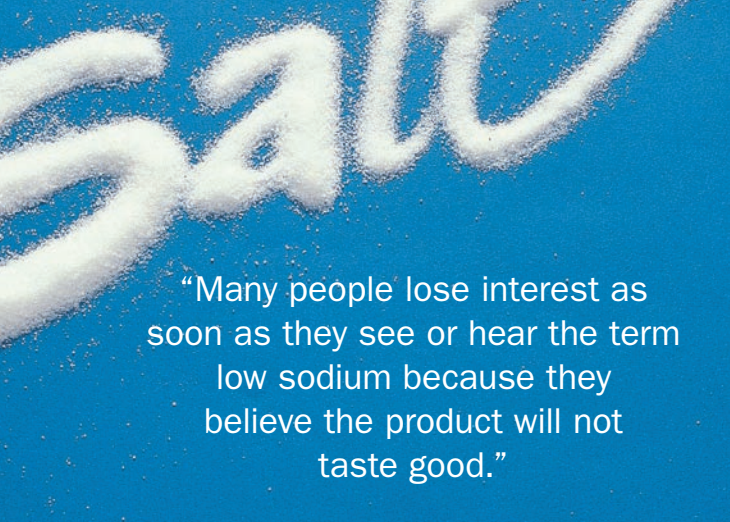
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particle size delivers more intensity and enables cutting salt by more than half without impacting flavour. The company’s second offering, LoSalt, contains 66.6 per cent potassium chloride and 33.3 per cent salt, with a granular size similar to salt. It’s available as well as a retail product in many countries, but not yet in Canada. Main Street also offers Capstone 1041, which adds only 1.4 mg of sodium per gram, compared to 396.60 mg of sodium per gram of salt. Labeled as a modified milk ingredient in Canada, it’s made by filtering



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milk to isolate compounds like calcium phosphate, which potentiate salty perception.

### Costly challenges

Valade believes that cost is the main reason many processors have held back on creating lower-sodium formulations of their products. “Salt costs next to nothing — about 30 cents/kg — and replacing it with something that costs about \$5/kg is not a priority for companies right now,” she says. That’s why Bouthillier advises “that the first step be reducing salt as much as you can before considering salt replacers.” As Capstone 1041 is low-cost versus other systems, he suggests starting with it and then top-noting “with other systems to achieve the functionality you desire.”

Besides costs and reformulation woes, companies also have the challenge of marketing lower-sodium products. “Many people lose interest as soon as they see or hear the term low sodium because they believe the product will not taste good,” says Gebhart. “In some cases, this is true. On the other end of the spectrum, you have consumers who want to purchase healthy items, so they intentionally seek out these products.” She believes, at least for some target product lines, that the current trend of gradually reducing sodium over time makes good marketing sense as well as business sense. One example is Campbell Canada’s lower-sodium soups. “After some time,” says Gebhart, “the consumer no longer needs those high amounts of salt in order for a product to taste good.”

Ultimately, notes Bouthillier, it’s extremely important to market lower-sodium products by emphasizing both the delivery of great taste and vital health benefits. “Sodium reduction can no longer be considered a trend but rather a principal objective in the industry,” he says. “Reduced-sodium foods will be mandatory in the U.S., Canada and worldwide. So, is it more important to be a leader in the category or risk losing market share and become reactionary? There lies the question.” ■

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