

INNOVA MARKET INSIGHTS

Wasabi Gains Popularity

While wasabi has been used in Asia for many generations, particularly in Japan, interest in its use as a flavouring elsewhere is clearly growing. The number of product launches outside Asia that feature wasabi has risen strongly in recent years. The **Innova Database** records that these launches have more than quadrupled over the past five years to over 220 in the 12 months to the end of September 2010. Europe and the USA, perhaps not surprisingly, accounted for nearly 90% of the total, with European markets accounting for 48%, ahead of the USA with over 40%.

Wasabi, also known as Japanese horseradish, is a root of the Brassicaceae family used as a spice for its characteristic hot, pungent flavour. Its use outside its home market of Japan has been facilitated by rising awareness through its use in Japanese restaurants, where it is often served with sushi or sashimi. Wasabi is caught up in the growing demand for more unusual and ever stronger flavours, particularly hot and spicy products other than the well-established chilli.

A review of the use of wasabi in new product launches via the **Innova Database** shows that the key application areas are sauces, seasonings and snacks. This varies from region to region, with sauces and seasonings accounting for over 40% of US launches in the year to the end of September 2010 and snacks taking another 30%. In Europe, on the other hand, snacks accounted for over 55% of launches, with sauces and seasonings on less than 17%.

With its high level of penetration of ethnic cuisines, product activity in the USA started rather earlier than that in Europe. Mainstream brands such as Frito-Lay started to use wasabi in the mid 2000s, as more ethnic and stronger flavours came to the fore. Blue Diamond Growers also launched a range of almonds featuring stronger flavours at that time, using the Bold sub-branding. The flavours were all claimed to be new for the nut category and included Wasabi & Soy Sauce, as well as Jalapeno Smokehouse, Lime & Chilli and Maui Onion & Garlic.

In Europe, the UK and Germany lead in terms of numbers of wasabi-flavoured products launched. Interesting launches in 2010 included a Fresh Beetroot Soup with Lime, Ginger and Wasabi from Yorkshire Provender as part of its chilled soups range and a Pea & Wasabi Dip from UK retailer Marks & Spencer. In 2009, wasabi flavours also broke into the mainstream snacks market in the UK, with launches including a Fiery Wasabi variant in Procter & Gamble's Xtreme extension to its Pringles stacked crisps brand. It

was launched alongside Exploding Cheese & Chilli, Smokin' Ribs and Flamin' Chilli Sauce variants. Premium crisps company Tyrrells also widened its offering to feature a range of alternative snacks, including Wasabi peanuts. Ethnic foods specialist Tiger Tiger launched its Nutties range of flavoured nuts to include a Wasabi variant, alongside other ethnic options, such as Thai Chili, Coconut, Ginger & Soy, Herb and Lemongrass and Thai Tom Yum.

In Germany, the Mr Wasabi Grüner Erbsen (green pea) Thai-Style snack was launched as long ago as 2005. However Lorenz Snack World really started the wave of mainstream interest in wasabi-flavoured snacks with its Wasabi Erdnüsse coated peanut line in 2008. This was followed in 2009 with a Wasabi extension to the Crispers coated peanut brand from leading nut company Ültje. Also a special edition variant of the Chio Chips premium potato crisps range came from Intersnack under the Chio Chips Wasabi-Style branding, featuring an extra spicy flavour and an intense green colour. More recently still, another Intersnack subsidiary Funny-frisch, added a limited edition wasabi flavour to its Erdnuss Flippies range of peanut flips.

Perhaps one of the most unusual applications for wasabi in Europe, however, was also from Germany, with the 2009 launch of an extension to the Kleiner Keiler vodka-based spirit range from Hardenberg-Wilthen adding an Orange Wasabi flavour to the existing Spicy Cherry variant.

According to **Lu Ann Williams, Innova Market Insight's Head of Research**, increasing levels of interest in the use of wasabi flavourings in Western markets are likely to continue, further developing the trend towards its incorporation not only in Japanese menus, but also in fusion cuisine and as a flavouring in prepared food and drink products of all kinds. As it becomes more commonplace as a distinctive, strong flavouring in its own right, we are likely to see ongoing product activity in existing markets, as well as appearances in a growing range of new areas.

For further information on the **Innova Database**, the representative for Australia and New Zealand is Glen Wells (Glen.Wells@innova-food.com.au).