

APRIL 30, 2019

Food firms globally whip up wacky ways to battle bad diets

[Annie Banerji](#), [Thin Lei Win](#)

SATARA, India/SINGAPORE (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Indian health worker Chhaya Sunil Jadhav banned snack food at home after her daughter, 11, fell sick from eating cheap, salty chips after school every day.

“She howled in pain and clutched her stomach. So we rushed her to the hospital,” said the mother-of-three. An ultrasound scan revealed “a giant ball of glue” in the girl’s gut, which doctors blamed on too much junk food.

Now, U.S. food giant Mars Inc and Mumbai-based charitable foundation Tata Trusts are marketing an alternative in western India: bite-sized squares made from yellow peas, which they say are packed with iron, protein, vitamins and micro-nutrients.

“If it is nutritious, I will buy this,” said Jadhav, trying a pack of GoMo Dal Crunchies, which costs 10 rupees (\$0.15), at a product demo in her village of Masur in Maharashtra state.

Around the globe, worries about human health, animal welfare and the environment are driving food firms to find wacky ways to keep people’s weight down and diseases at bay.

For poor diet has overtaken smoking as the world’s biggest killer, according to the latest Global Burden of Disease study, causing 20 percent of deaths globally in 2017.

Launched in November, the pea-based snack is the first joint product from Mars and Tata Trusts - which owns two-thirds of India’s salt-to-software conglomerate Tata Sons - after they agreed in 2016 to boost nutrition and food safety in Asia’s third-largest economy.

The aim, said Tata Trusts advisor Mansharan Seth, is to offer an “affordable, accessible, nutritious” snack in rural India, where poverty and a lack of education mean many children suffer from health problems due to their diet.

“We are (often) talking to someone who is probably hearing the words ‘protein’, ‘minerals’, ‘vitamins’ for the first time,” she said at the new \$75-million factory making the product. “This is not an overnight solution.”

CORPORATE BABY STEPS

Recent data shows the problem is not only about getting enough food, but the right, healthy kind like whole grains, nuts, seeds, fresh fruits and vegetables.

The Global Burden of Disease study, led by the U.S.-based Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, found people were eating food high in sugar and salt that contributed to heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

Globally, diabetes affects 422 million people, killing about 1.6 million in 2016, according to the World Health Organization.

Rita Teatia, head of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, said Indians accounted for the second-largest group of diabetics globally.

Nutritionists and activists have long accused big food and beverage companies of courting poor consumers with drinks and snacks high in salt, sugar and fat, while doing too little to stem rising obesity and diet-related illnesses.

Shweta Khandelwal, a nutritionist at the Public Health Foundation of India, said some firms tried to confuse consumers with misleading product descriptions and nutrition labels and too few were “really trying to make a difference”.

But not all is doom and gloom, said Teatia.

More than 20 corporations - including Mars, U.S. cereal maker Kellogg Company and food and beverage firm Nestle - have pledged to reformulate recipes by 2022 as part of the “Eat Right India” campaign.

Kellogg said it had cut more than 1,000 tonnes of sugar - the weight of 10 blue whales - and 200 tonnes of salt from its foods in Asia-Pacific, and had stopped using artificial colors, preservatives and flavors in its products globally.

Nestle said it had reduced sugar in its products by 34 percent since 2000 and hoped to chop 5 percent more by 2020.

To help tackle the problem, Asia-based companies like Alchemy Foodtech and Nutrition Innovation are trying to lower the glycemic index (GI) of food, a measure of how quickly it can raise blood sugar levels.

In response to family problems, Singaporean couple Alan Phua and Verleen Goh have spent three years designing a plant-based product, 5ibrePlus, to add to common foods to reduce their GI.

Both of Phua's grandmothers died of diabetes complications, while five of his mother's siblings are type-2 diabetic, he said at the Alchemy Food Tech office in a leafy Singapore suburb.

"I wanted a kind of technology or solution that can be practical (and) fits everyday life, so that I can see my loved ones being protected," he explained.

Adding 5ibrePlus to jasmine rice can lower its GI to that of brown rice without changing the taste or texture, Phua said.

Alchemy's founders are working with bread and noodle producers and rice distributors to make the product available later this year.

Nutrition Innovation, another Singapore-based firm, recently raised \$5 million from investors for its technology that can be used by mills to produce low-GI sugar on an industrial scale.

'YUCKY TO YUMMY'

Meanwhile, alternative meat companies are eyeing health and environmentally-conscious consumers in Asia.

Life3 Biotech's plant-based protein, Veego, is slated to start production this year, said company founder Ricky Lin.

"From yucky to yummy - it took about three years," laughed Lin. Veego, he said, has a similar texture and protein level to chicken but without its usual fats and cholesterol.

Singapore-based startup Shiok Meats hopes to supply products derived from seafood cells grown in a lab to high-end restaurants by the end of 2020, and sell them in supermarkets in three to five years, said co-founder Ka Yi Ling.

“In Asia, we eat a lot of seafood, especially shrimp,” she said. “There is a lot of environmental impact ... and most importantly, with the population growth in Asia, it’s hard to sustain that demand.”

Non-meat eaters, for their part, can take advantage of the one-year-old app “abillionveg”, which reviews vegetarian and vegan dishes in photos snapped and uploaded by its users and notifies restaurants in a bid for motivate them to offer more.

Founder and lifelong vegetarian Vikas Garg remembered having to settle for a lacklustre salad at the numerous steak-houses he visited as an investment banker.

“You don’t want your vegetarian or vegan meal to be a compromise or sacrifice,” he said. “We’re also trying to convince businesses that their plant-based dish should be the best thing on the menu.”