

CONSUMING NEWS

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How Barilla PLUS[®] came to the American Consumer

If you haven't tried Barilla PLUS[®] pasta yet, you should! Barilla's multi-grain, fiber and protein pasta is the best tasting brand of its kind available to date. And what we found most interesting in a recent article published in Stagnito's New Products Magazine - excerpted here with permission - is what lengths the company went to in bringing it to the American market. -CWM*

Barilla Plus pasta is made from multi-grains, legumes, ground flaxseed, wheat fiber and egg whites. It contains omega-3's, and has twice as much fiber and 40 percent more protein than traditional pastas. It's nutritionally balanced before any sauce, vegetables or other traditional forms of protein are added to it, and purposefully so, because Barilla realized many pasta users, namely children, don't want anything on their pasta.

"The idea was to reinvent pasta for consumers who eat pasta as an entree," says Kamal Dagher, former vice president of R&D at Bannockburn based Barilla America, currently a consultant for the company.

But, he says, there were a combination of factors that drove development of the product. "The first motivation came from R&D," says Dagher. "The pasta that Barilla makes is authentic, Italian pasta, but for the U.S. market, or any market outside Italy that eats pasta differently from Italians, what would the ideal pasta be? Based on habits and how people eat pasta, balanced nutrition seemed to be the answer," Dagher says.

Pasta is great as a complex carbohydrate, but to be complete it also had to be a good source of fiber, protein and appealing to kids," offered Dagher. "Pasta needs to be viewed as a finished product, because that's how Americans eat it. If it's balanced before you put the sauce on it, that's the best." The idea of a "balanced" pasta led to more questions than answers: Where do you draw the line with functional benefits? How close to traditional pasta do you need to be before the "benefits" don't matter?

Barilla tries to be as consumer driven as possible. At company headquarters in Parma, Italy, a large innovation center is equipped with six kitchens where consumers are brought in to cook and be interviewed by employees. "It's bringing home visits to the company. We don't have that in the United States, so we compensate by going to peoples' homes," says Dagher. The goal was to determine the needs of families with small children, the volume drivers of the pasta category.

"If you're doing continuous innovation, a lot can get lost in translation. It's firsthand experience that gives you the subtleties and nuances that you must make sure are delivered," says Dagher, who personally made every home visit in researching American households. "Innovation is difficult for many companies. There are too many layers working on pieces of innovation. I

know the temptation exists to speed up or cut corners, but I need a direct feel for what's important and what can't be compromised. For upgrading existing products or fine-tuning already successful products, you don't have to go to such lengths. It's all about unarticulated needs: Consumers don't know they're articulating a need when they are preparing dinner. They do things unconsciously. But, when you observe and probe, you stand a chance of getting the insight that otherwise



would be impossible to get. For example, people didn't always add a lot of other things to sauce, and consumers wouldn't necessarily articulate why they do now."

The company's picture of the finished product emerged with protein, fiber and carbohydrates as the focus. Protein is delivered from multigrain (coarse durum wheat, oats, spelt and barley) and legume flour (lentils and chickpeas), as well as from egg whites. The multigrains and legumes also deliver fiber and complex carbohydrates. Fiber is further enhanced with ground flaxseed and wheat fiber. (Flaxseed is also a good source of alpha linolenic acid, an essential omega-3 fatty acid.) But even with this clear vision of a nutritious pasta product, variables continued to build. Take something as basic as color. Pasta is generally slightly tan and lightens with the boiling process. If it's too dark, kids won't like it. But if it's too light, adults won't find it credible. Barilla showed a range of colors to parents and drew a balance where it was credible to them, but not objectionable to kids.

Another question: How much of each ingredient is the right amount? Put in too many legumes and the product will taste like legumes, not pasta. Too few legumes and it becomes a gimmick. "You can compromise, but the judgments will come back to bite you — and cost you — in the end. Barilla Plus could have gone to market a year and half earlier," says Dagher. "We stayed focused and continued to use kids and that was the most difficult thing." The first few rounds of trials didn't come close, Dagher admits. Early prototypes had the texture of

cardboard, or were mushy. Each drawback had to be defined and fixed.

Manufacturing proved as much of a challenge as R&D; it, too, took about a year and a half to master. "You're going from a process with one ingredient and dosings of water to something that has 10 to 12 ingredients. We needed new equipment, a place to put it, and we had to buy both; then install it, and begin production trials — things like color and other aesthetics can all be altered [due to the atmosphere] in a plant," says Dagher.

Company research also indicated that 90 percent of homes that had tried whole wheat didn't use the product again because kids were adverse to the gritty feel in their mouths and darker color. "Most whole wheat is consumed by empty nesters. Of the few moms who use whole wheat, they mix it with regular pasta to fool the kids," says Dagher. "The obstacle isn't price, it's taste, texture and color. It's all part of the balancing act."

Price wise, Barilla Plus is set apart from the competition by its premium price tag, about \$1.79 per pound. "Whole wheat products on the market are costly, more than \$2 per pound," says Dagher, "and we look at that as the upper limit. We knew it would be more costly than regular pasta, because commodities such as durum wheat are higher priced and

when you add lentils, flax seeds, and egg whites you're talking 10 times more in cost. "We're trying to make Barilla Plus mainstream, not more profitable [than regular Barilla pasta], but the cost has to pay for the significant upcharges of materials. To date, a box of Barilla at \$1.79 per pound and a jar of sauce can still feed a family of four," he says.

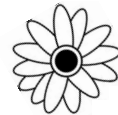
Dagher expects recognition and broad acceptance will evolve over the next several years, with the full potential of the product following in subsequent years. Time-consuming development, huge capital investments and uncharted territory; three unthinkable factors for a publicly traded company, not even a tough sell for privately owned Barilla Pasta. "Barilla Plus would have been tough to justify for a public company. The chairman [Guido Barilla] is willing to have a good balance of doing the right thing and making a reasonable profit," says Dagher. "We wanted to deliver balanced nutrition that would satisfy the most demanding dietitians and nutritionists, and with taste, texture and color that would satisfy the most finicky kids," he says. "We knew that the combination of these two benefits is what made the project very difficult to achieve. At the same time, we also knew that achieving both benefits is what made the project worthwhile."

* *Stagnito's New Products Magazine* is a food industry publication dedicated to new product development. For more information log onto: www.stagnito.com

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