The More Things Change...

It was great to see food technologists and the processed-food industry gravitating toward nutrition. But in some ways it also seemed like the same old leviathan, changing course slightly, but still gobbling up and transmogrifying everything in its path as it churned out more processed foods.

That’s because the big money is in processing commodities like fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, not in selling the commodities themselves. But let’s not forget that it’s on those commodities that humankind thrived for countless centuries. Carrot, anyone?

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MEMO FROM MFJ

It was back in May 1972 at the annual meeting of the Institute of Food Technologists that I first introduced myself to the group and to its members in industry and in university food-science departments.

Those are the ingenious folks who created Cool Whip and Kool Aid, Pop Rocks and Corn Pops. In those days, virtually all processed foods were junk foods.

My friends and I challenged scientists walking in the hallways to try some granola—and then watched them re-col as if the whole grain cereal were kryptonite.

This July, for the first time in three decades, I stopped by the IFT’s annual meeting. Vive la change! The food technologists have matured...as have I (as one would hope).

There were about 1,000 exhibitors in the giant hall in Chicago, and I wasn’t surprised to see plenty of ingredients for junk foods, with free samples at booth after booth. For example, one company attracted traffic with bowls of Hershey treats that were made with the company’s PGPR, an emulsifier that allows chocolate-makers to use less cocoa butter. (Companies prefer to list the ingredient as PGPR instead of polyglycerol polyricinoleate, a name some consumers might choke on.)

Still, it was jarring to see the University of California at Davis’ food-science department handing out packages of Jelly Belly candies. We need universities to push candy?

The real surprise was that an impressive number of exhibitors were touting products to make foods healthier or safer. There was even a section, with some three dozen booths, devoted to organic foods and ingredients, something that in the 1970s would have been rejected as heresy. And, yes, one company was even handing out granola!

A few examples:

- Salt reducers were everywhere: soy sauce derivatives with their umami flavor that can be used in a variety of foods, calcium and potassium phosphates to replace sodium phosphates in baked goods and processed meats and poultry, and ammonium glutamate to replace some of the salt in soups, snacks, and sauces.
- Naturally derived stevia derivatives were the rage for replacing sugar, high-fructose corn syrup, and synthetic chemicals like aspartame and sucralose. (Don’t be surprised to see foods at the health-food store that are sweetened with the new mogrosides-V. It’s made from Chinese monkberries.)
- Companies from Wuhan (China) to Tarrytown (New York) were offering bright natural colorings made from red cabbage, purple sweet potatoes, grape skins, black carrots, beet roots, co-chineal insects, and (not yet allowed in American foods) blue gardenias.

Who needs synthetic—and potentially harmful—food colorings when vibrant natural colors like these are available?

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NATURAL GREENS

- Kale
- Spinach
- Broccoli
- Collard greens
- Brussels sprouts
- Beet greens
- Arugula
- Lettuce
- Watercress

NATURAL REDS

- Red bell peppers
- Tomatoes
- Cherries
- Cranberries
- Raspberries
- Blackberries
- Pomegranate seeds
- Beet greens

NATURAL BROWNS

- Sweet potatoes
- Carrots
- Brown rice
- Rye
- Whole wheat
- Barley

NATURAL WHITES

- Cauliflower
- Celery
- Cabbage
- Radishes
- Turnips
- Onions
- Leeks

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