

Diners want healthier foods; even Cup Noodles is trying to please them

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Natalie Hou, a research and development specialist, displays noodles while holding a cup of spicy lime shrimp Cup Noodles soup in the test kitchen at Nissin Foods USA's headquarters in Gardena, California, September 12, 2016. This is a new, healthier version of Cup Noodles with no added MSG, lower sodium, and no artificial ingredients, the company says. Photo: Mel Melcon/Los Angeles Times/TNS

LOS ANGELES, Calif. — Cup Noodles became a staple in college dorms because of its cost and convenience. If you had pocket change, boiling water and three minutes to spare, you could eat Japanese ramen — or at least an approximation of it — out of a handy foam cup.

But in the 45 years since Cup Noodles first appeared on supermarket shelves, Americans have become increasingly inclined to read nutritional labels even in the snack aisle. Now food companies are scrambling to catch up to changing tastes, introducing organic Gatorade and unsalted Kettle potato chips to appeal to health-conscious diners.

On Sept. 15, Nissin Foods USA — the Gardena-based arm of the Japanese instant noodle giant Nissin Foods Group — said it, too, is changing with the times. For the first time, Cup Noodles is getting a recipe overhaul. All eight flavors — which contain fried noodles, seasoning and dried ingredients such as vegetables — have been retooled by reducing sodium and stripping out MSG and artificial flavors. The new versions will be available only in the U.S.

A first-ever national advertising campaign will launch in coming months to introduce the changes to Cup Noodles, which helped the company rack up \$3.6 billion in global sales in its 2015 fiscal year.

Before the change, Cup Noodles' most popular flavor, chicken, contained 1,430 mg of sodium — about 60 percent of the daily recommended intake. The new version, which has started hitting store shelves, contains 1,070 mg of sodium — about 45 percent of the daily recommended intake. Hydrolyzed vegetable protein has replaced artificial MSG. Green cabbage juice was added to boost the taste.

Al Multari, chief executive of Nissin Foods USA, said the recipe changes were in direct response to feedback from customers, who wanted the same taste but with an improved nutritional profile.

"They were saying, 'We love your product, but we'd really like to see these changes made,'" Multari said.

The Cup Noodles tweaks come as long-standing food brands are racing to keep up with a rapidly evolving American palate that's starting to favor grab-and-go salads over burgers and fries.

Fast food chains such as McDonald's, which have been struggling, are touting changes intended to appeal to a new generation of diners, such as cage-free Egg McMuffins. Taco Bell, Pizza Hut and candy-maker Nestle USA have said they are axing artificial ingredients. Kraft has rolled out its classic macaroni and cheese without synthetic colors.

Other noodle makers have already made similar tweaks. Toyo Suisan Kaisha, which makes a popular brand called Maruchan and racked up \$3.2 billion of global sales in the 2015 fiscal year, has rolled out products that contain 35 percent less sodium. Its Instant Lunch chicken flavor, which comes in a cup, clocks in at 660 mg, or about 28 percent of daily intake. Nongshim's Shin brand also offers noodles without added MSG.

Multari, who last year became the first non-Japanese or Japanese-American head of the company, said Nissin hoped such changes will help boost Cup Noodles sales, which have been flat in recent years (there was a slight uptick during the Great Recession, and then sales fell and eventually plateaued as the economy improved, he says).

That same sluggish performance can be seen in the overall industry. U.S. sales of instant noodles were \$1.06 billion last year, up just 4.1 percent from \$1.02 billion in 2010, according to research firm Euromonitor.

Americans rank fifth worldwide in demand, out-slurped only by China, Indonesia, Japan and Vietnam, according to the World Instant Noodles Association. However, U.S. consumption has fallen slightly. Last year, Americans chowed down on 4.2 billion servings of instant noodles, down from 4.4 billion in 2013, the association said.

The slowdown for instant noodles comes as ramen is enjoying a moment in the U.S. After chef and restaurateur David Chang opened Momofuku Noodle Bar in New York, more ramen restaurants have popped up around the country. In Los Angeles, well-known ramen shop Tsujita is opening an outpost in the Americana at Brand; in downtown L.A., several are opening up including Tokyo Strike and Ramen Hood.

“This is a growing category,” says Jim Prevor, a food analyst at the Perishable Pundit. “Everyone is looking at it and trying to hook onto it.”

That’s in part due to Asian transplants, who are the fastest-growing immigrant group in the U.S., Prevor says. Many dishes once foreign to Americans, such as sushi and pizza, have now become commonplace foods.

At Nissin, executives say they hope the new recipes will expand the demographic of Cup Noodles buyers, who fall heavily into two camps: millennials, such as college students, and lower-income folks who rely on Cup Noodle’s affordability. The price — 45 cents or less per cup — is also staying the same despite the added cost of the new ingredients, they said.

“We have a lot of light and medium users that are kind of managing how much they eat because they know it is high in sodium,” says Leslie Mohr, vice president of marketing. By addressing those concerns, she said, the company believes those customers will be encouraged to buy Cup Noodles more frequently, and even lure “lapsed users” to try it again.

Cup Noodles is Nissin’s second best-selling brand in the U.S. Top Ramen, the No. 1 brand, isn’t packaged as a single serving and doesn’t come with its own cup.

In 1958, Nissin founder Momofuku Ando introduced Japan to instant ramen, a concoction he invented in a backyard shed. But the idea of selling noodles in their own cup — Nissin’s claim to fame — was inspired by Ando’s 1966 trip to America. There he witnessed office workers divvy up a package of ramen, place the pieces into paper cups and add hot water, according to company lore.

The new recipes were developed in the sprawling facility, which opened in 1970, about 13 miles southwest of Los Angeles. It spans 17 acres with office space, a warehouse and a factory that churns out “hundreds of millions” of Cup Noodles a year, Multari said. A second manufacturing plant is located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The company employs about 400 workers nationwide.

Inside the test kitchen, about 10 employees equipped with four microwaves and three fridges have been working for a year to recraft the Cup Noodles recipe.

Monique Au-Yeung, a senior research and development specialist, acknowledged the process was sometimes frustrating. It took 13 tries, for instance, just to revamp the chicken variety alone. “It’s a balance of all materials for the flavor,” she says. The trickiness often came “towards the end, where you have to fine-tune the flavors.”

Rachel Scherr, an assistant research scientist at the University of California, Davis' department of nutrition, says any nutritional improvement was a step in the right direction. But Cup Noodles still contains a high level of sodium, she says, and the sodium replacement, potassium chloride, is not necessarily healthier than salt, she says.

"I would say it's a sometime food, not an everyday food," she says. id.

Multari says the Cup Noodles overhaul is just the first step. He says the company will quiz customers on other Nissin products, which could be tweaked as well.

"It's a challenge for all brands to always remain relevant," he says. "That's what we're trying to do."

Quiz

- 1 Read the sentence from the article.

Rachel Scherr, an assistant research scientist at the University of California, Davis' department of nutrition, says any nutritional improvement was a step in the right direction. But Cup Noodles still contains a high level of sodium, she says, and the sodium replacement, potassium chloride, is not necessarily healthier than salt, she says.

Which of the following conclusions can be drawn from this sentence?

- (A) Cup Noodles is now the healthiest brand of instant noodles on the market.
 - (B) Further improvements need to be made before Cup Noodles is a healthy food choice.
 - (C) The changes that were made to Cup Noodles will have no impact on its flavor.
 - (D) The addition of potassium chloride has made Cup Noodles less healthy than before.
- 2 Which of the following sentences shows the popularity of instant noodles in the U.S.?
- (A) Before the change, Cup Noodles' most popular flavor, chicken, contained 1,430 mg of sodium — about 60 percent of the daily recommended intake.
 - (B) Americans rank fifth worldwide in demand, out-slurped only by China, Indonesia, Japan and Vietnam, according to the World Instant Noodles Association.
 - (C) After chef and restaurateur David Chang opened Momofuku Noodle Bar in New York, more ramen restaurants have popped up around the country.
 - (D) There he witnessed office workers divvy up a package of ramen, place the pieces into paper cups and add hot water, according to company lore.

3 What purpose is served by including examples of other food companies that are making changes to their products?

- (A) It explains the complex background of artificial ingredients in many of the most popular foods people eat.
- (B) It explains that the declining popularity of Cup Noodles is because people have stopped liking instant noodles.
- (C) It demonstrates that consumer demand for healthier products is behind many changes in the food industry.
- (D) It demonstrates that Cup Noodles is the last company to make necessary changes for consumer health.

4 Which answer choice BEST describes the article's structure?

- (A) The article explains the changes made by a popular food company and the reasons for them.
- (B) The article compares the nutritional values of different instant noodle products.
- (C) The article gives a list of food brands and their response to consumer demands.
- (D) The article describes the chronological history of a company's growth.