

FOOD VISION ASIA 2017

Minister unveils pro-industry plan to fight diabetes in Singapore

By RJ Whitehead

26-Apr-2017 - Last updated on 24-May-2017 at 03:31 GMT

Singapore's minister of state for health has revealed a new business-first approach to encourage healthier food development as part of a three-pronged "war on diabetes".



Speaking at Food Vision Asia, a three-day event organised by William Reed Business Media, which also owns FoodNavigator-Asia, Chee Hong Tat said the government will *"support and work with the food industry on its innovation journey"*.

He said the first goal of the strategy will be to give more support to companies that undertake healthier product innovation. The government will also set out to foster a supportive regulatory environment to encourage experimentation and transform Singapore into a launchpad for companies based there to export overseas.

The tripartite plan comes in response to official figures that show Singapore to be in the grip of a diabetes epidemic whereby some 400,000 residents already have the disease. Chee said this figure will rise to 1m if nothing is done to address it.

Unlike in Western countries, where obesity is the main contributor to diabetes, the disease's growth in Asia is blamed on the widespread consumption of starchy foods like rice and noodles, and sugar-laden packaged foods.

The government's action plan will place particular emphasis on taste and convenience through innovation, he said.

"As we become more health-conscious, these alone will no longer be enough for consumers," Chee said.

"I believe that health and taste are not mutually exclusive. I am therefore excited to see many companies rising to meet the need of the Asian market."

Coca-Cola was singled out by the minister for making progress in its efforts to market healthier drinks and food products, and recently adopting the government's Healthier Food symbol for its low-sugar products.

"Of course, it is still best to drink water, but if you occasionally want to consume a soft drink, a healthier choice will give consumers more options."

Nestlé also earned a mention for its development of novel sugars that can provide physiological benefits and more sweetness for food products, while homegrown businesses were also given a name-check.

Chee said: *"I am proud of our local companies, such as Alchemy Foodtech, supported by Spring Singapore, which is currently working on creating low-GI white rice that tastes the same as regular rice."*

"Sunshine Bakeries has incorporate beta gluten to create a low-GI bread with a soft texture that appeals to many Asians. Noodle manufacturers such as Prima have developed a super-fine version of wholegrain flour to create noodles that are 50% wholegrain but retain the taste and texture of regular noodles. My family and I have tried both products and they taste good."

Outlining the first pillar of the government's strategy, the minister said the ability to combine taste with healthier features would be essential for manufacturers to succeed in persuading consumers to change their long-developed eating habits.

To this end the Ministry of Health's new Healthier Ingredient Value Scheme will invest S\$20m (US\$14.4m) over the next three years to support the commercial development of healthier staple ingredients.

"Unlike most grants that typically cover only capability costs such as R&D, HIVS will also provide end-to-end support in areas such as product development, marketing, publicity and trade negotiations," Chee said.

The government has already begun discussions with food companies and the first projects supported by HIVS are expected to begin in July.

"We are very happy to work with the industry to see how we can co-create, collaborate and come up with healthier food products," the minister added.

Next, the government will support enterprise development by creating a *"supportive regulatory environment for innovations to triumph"*.

It will work with other agencies to *"ease regulatory pathways"* and speed up the approval process for novel ingredients and product benefit claims, including those that support the war on diabetes.

Just as the novel sugar amylose was recently approved by Singapore's regulator for use ahead of other developed countries, the Ministry of Health will also apply a similar approach to other areas under its purview.

"We will work with regional partners to progressively align our product guidelines and government schemes, such as Healthier Choice labelling," Chee said.

He told food companies that this approach would lead to greater uniformity in guidelines, and lower regulatory burdens when they export their products.

"If you get your accreditation in one country, it will mean that you can also be recognised without having to go through the entire accreditation process in another. This will help if manufacturers are planning to use

Finally, the government aims to strengthen and support companies to use Singapore as a *"launchpad for success in other Asian markets"*.

"We are recognised worldwide for the quality and safety of our products and we also have a good mix of food from different regions, and we have strong R&D capabilities, so I think there is a good ecosystem of support for companies to come up with innovative food products for consumers at home and overseas."

These efforts will include government grants to encourage multinational companies based in Singapore to help local SMEs deliver innovative products, similar to how the IT segment has approached collaborations between global leaders and local start-ups.

He said: *"I think the same can be done in the food manufacturing industry. It will benefit the market."*

"I would like to urge industry players and associations to work closely with the government through a collaboration model to create healthy, delicious products that can be enjoyed by consumers."

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