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Can Cocoa-Free Innovation Transform the Future of Chocolate?

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As climate pressures, supply chain disruptions, and rising cocoa prices reshape the global confectionery landscape, food manufacturers are increasingly exploring innovative alternatives that can deliver both sustainability and sensory appeal. In response to these evolving market dynamics, Cargill has introduced NextCoa, a cocoa-free confectionery solution developed in collaboration with Voyage Foods, designed to offer the indulgent chocolatey-like experience consumers expect while supporting greater supply chain resilience.

In this interview with NUFFOODS Spectrum, Mia Divecha, Senior Product Line Specialist at Cargill, discusses the market forces driving the emergence of cocoa alternatives, the role of upcycled ingredients such as grape seeds, and how NextCoa is positioned as a complementary category alongside traditional chocolate. She also shares insights into consumer expectations, sustainability benefits, manufacturing integration, and the future growth potential of cocoa-free confectionery across bakery, snacks, and frozen dessert applications.

What market trends and supply chain challenges motivated the launch of NextCoa, and how do you see cocoa-free confectionery evolving within the broader chocolate industry?

Manufacturers are navigating a dynamic cocoa market. Climate-related impacts like drought and disease pressure in key growing regions, ongoing supply-chain uncertainty and evolving regulatory expectations are all contributing to a more complex sourcing environment.

NextCoa confectionery alternatives to chocolate provide an additional option to help manufacturers manage risk while continuing to deliver the chocolatey-like taste consumers expect. Itâ??s not about replacing chocolate â?? itâ??s about expanding choice and helping companies build more flexibility into their product and sourcing strategies.

NextCoa is positioned as a chocolate alternative rather than a replacement. How important is consumer perception and taste parity in driving adoption among manufacturers and consumers?

Taste and sensory experience are absolutely critical. Consumers purchase indulgent products because they enjoy the experience, so delivering on flavour, texture, aroma and appearance is foundational. In our consumer testing, we found this innovative line delivers the chocolatey-like experience consumers expect.

Could you elaborate on the sustainability advantages of using ingredients like grape seeds and how this contributes to supply chain resilience?

One of the key innovations behind the NextCoa products is the use of plant-based ingredients such as upcycled grape seeds. Upcycling allows ingredients that might otherwise go unused to be repurposed into new food applications, contributing to a more resource-efficient food system. The product also delivers measurable environmental advantages, including a 67 per cent lower carbon footprint compared with conventional chocolate, based on third-party verified lifecycle assessment data.

Beyond these benefits, diversified ingredient sourcing can also support greater supply chain resilience. Cocoa production remains highly concentrated geographically and can be vulnerable to climate-related disruptions. NextCoa products provide an additional option to help manufacturers diversify sourcing strategies and continue delivering the chocolatey-like taste consumers expect.

How does the partnership between Cargill and Voyage Foods combine innovation and supply chain capabilities to accelerate commercialisation?

Voyage Foods developed the foundational technology behind the NextCoa line.Â They wanted a partner that could help commercialise the innovation. Thatâ??s where Cargill came in, with our global scale, application expertise, customer relationships and commercial reach.

What opportunities do you see for NextCoa across categories such as bakery, snacks, and ice cream?

The NextCoa portfolio was designed for a broad range of confectionery and bakery applications, including inclusions in bars, baked goods and ice cream, as well as coatings for snacks and confectionery treats like truffles.

In the U.S., we currently offer two flavours: Mild, a milk-chocolatey style; and Dark Mild, which blends dark and milk chocolatey-like flavours. The products are available in multiple formats, including tempering wafers, non-tempering wafers and bake-stable drops.

What challenges do manufacturers face when reformulating with cocoa alternatives, and how is NextCoa designed to integrate into existing processes?

Manufacturers need solutions that deliver on sensory appeal, scalability and operational performance â?? all areas NextCoa was designed to support. Importantly, NextCoa was designed to run on existing manufacturing lines with minimal disruption.

Do you see cocoa-free alternatives becoming a long-term complementary category alongside traditional chocolate, particularly given rising prices and climate concerns?

Yes. Cocoa and chocolate will remain foundational to the industry, and consumer demand for traditional chocolate remains strong â?? 89 per cent of consumers in the U.S. say they eat chocolate at least once a week, according to the National Confectioners Association.

At the same time, more consumers are also looking for products that can meet evolving dietary and allergen-related preferences, particularly the estimated 33 million Americans living with food allergies. The NextCoa line helps address those needs as itâ??s formulated without major allergens.

It also gives manufacturers additional options to diversify sourcing strategies and build greater resilience into their portfolios. That flexibility matters even more as the industry faces climate-related impacts and evolving regulatory expectations.

Are there plans to expand the NextCoa portfolio into additional formats, flavours, or international markets beyond North America?

We first launched NextCoa confectionery alternatives in Europe, and now weâ??re expanding commercial availability to customers in the U.S., with plans to broaden availability to Canada.

The platform itself offers significant future potential. We will continue evaluating additional applications, formats and market opportunities as customer interest evolves.

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