

IMACE Position on product improvement by innovation

Brussels, February 2016

Key messages

IMACE is the European federation representing the interests of European margarine producers. Directly and indirectly, IMACE covers about 32 companies with numerous plants throughout EU28, Norway and Switzerland. It is estimated that over 70% of the EU margarine production is covered by the IMACE membership structure.

Margarines and vegetable oil spreads contribute to a healthy and balanced diet by providing the essential nutrients to the human body. This is because they are packed with good vegetable oils and fats which contribute to the intake of essential fatty acids, such as Omega-3 (ALA) and Omega-6 (LA) fatty acids and which also act as a carrier for vitamins A, D, E and K.

A daily moderate intake of vegetable/plant based fats helps people take good care of their health in general and of their heart health in particular.

The beneficial fatty acid profile (i.e. ratios of MUFA, PUFA and SAFA) of margarines and vegetable oil spreads is the positive result of the continuous efforts of the margarine manufacturers to improve the recipes of their products and adapt these to meet the latest nutritional scientific evidence and consumer needs.

Innovation is at the heart of the margarine and spreads business

Product improvement and innovation have always been a key focus for IMACE Members, who follow latest scientific developments to improve the nutritional quality of their products, whilst maintaining their technical, functional and taste performance.

Within the current discussions on food product improvement it is important to acknowledge what our sector already has achieved so far (on a voluntary basis):

- Full nutritional labelling has been provided on margarines and spreads for optimal transparent information to consumers. This was done long before the implementation of the Food Information to Consumers (FIC) legislation.
- There has been a significant drop of the overall fat content of margarine, spreads and liquid margarines' formulations (current offer ranges from 20-80% fat content, adapted to individual needs & specific applications).

- The oil blends were continuously optimised, increasing the content of unsaturated fatty acids, especially omega-3, and decreasing the content of saturated fatty acids.
- TFA content has been lowered to less than 2% on fat basis (1% on product basis).
- Liquid margarines with an improved fatty acid profile (more unsaturated fatty acids, lower saturated fatty acids) were introduced for cooking and baking applications in the 90's.
- Fat soluble vitamins (A, D and E) are added (or are naturally present in the oil blends) to margarines and spreads to ensure a sufficient intake of those vitamins.
- Margarines and spreads are enriched with long chain omega-3 fatty acids (DHA and EPA) and with plant stanols and sterols.
- Margarines and spreads suited for vegetarians, vegans and other special dietary requirements were developed.

These continuous voluntary efforts on product improvement result today in a large offer of healthy plant-based fat sources (from 20 to 80% fat content). It allows consumers to improve their fat intake and even more importantly the quality of the fat intake, by providing an opportunity to replace saturated fatty acids with unsaturated fatty acids.

The large range of B2B margarines and tailor-made B2B solutions, offer food producers in other food sectors a healthier plant-based fat source, allowing improvement of the fat quality (healthier fatty acid composition) of their end products.

Innovation and guidance for improving the fat intake of populations

An important health gain for the population lies in the improvement of the quality of the fat intake. There is a scientific consensus that replacement of saturated fats by the healthier unsaturated fats helps to reduce cholesterol, which is an established risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Therefore, the healthier plant-based oils and fats should be promoted over the more saturated animal fat sources. The intake of animal fat sources should be reduced, as suggested by international dietary guidelines and recommendations.

Margarines, spreads and blended spreads are already well advanced when it comes to the fat quality; minor further nutritional improvements can be made.

IMACE Members are committed to perpetuate the good results obtained in the composition of their margarines, spreads and blended spreads.

The IMACE Members are also committed to inform and educate the consumers on the right portion size, nutritional benefits and easy swaps to improve their diets. (e.g. moving from margarines in sticks and wrappers to soft spreads and liquid formats).

General thoughts on the current political discussion on improvement

IMACE is of the opinion that improved product formulations and innovation are an important, but not the sole element for driving healthier diets in the population.

IMACE believes that optimal product improvements and innovation should go hand in hand with consumer education and information, allowing consumers to make choices on the basis of balanced and understandable information to help them to obtain a balanced and healthy diet in accordance with their physical activity.

Product improvement and innovation measures should be voluntary. Also, achievements of the past and the remaining window of opportunities for the concerned sector should be taken into account in the discussion.

Culture, gastronomy, functionality and taste preferences need to be taken into account in product improvement as the products need to be accepted by the consumers in order to have an impact on public health.

The regulatory and commercial environment should facilitate and stimulate innovation. Innovation is often hampered by the current specific regulations, the lack of harmonization of national legislations, the lack of consistent enforcement between Member States as well as contradicting national policies. In order to foster innovation, the following measures should be implemented:

- The mutual recognition of national laws, for example on vitamin fortification of spreads;
- The implementation of maximum fortification levels for vitamins, minerals and other substances as specified in Regulation (EC) No 1925/2006;
- Enabling the industry to communicate on their reformulation achievements:
 - The margarine and spread sector has reformulated its products to have less than 1% TFA on product basis. However, both the Labelling Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 and the Health and Nutrition Claims Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006 prevent the industry to properly communicate/educate consumers on the real TFA content of its products.
 - The requirements of the Health and Nutrition Claims Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006 limit the reformulation efforts of the industry. Minimum 30% reduction for the reduction claim is a big step for reformulation. Smaller steps could also offer a health gain, while allowing communication on the reformulation efforts.