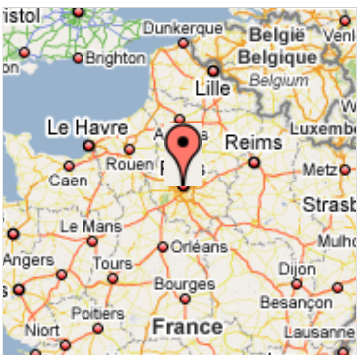




Photo 1 of 4



People visit Paris' Sial "global food marketplace fair" on the event's opening day on October 19



Gastronomy 'glasnost' brings wild new tastes to the plate

Oct 23, 2008

PARIS (AFP) — Dried flowers, oil-laced fruit juice and spicy honey! Edibles about to hit the shelves being showcased at the world's largest food fair this week are proof in the pudding of a foodie revolution to come.

Despite the dour financial climate, which food industry specialists say is slowing up the launch of new products, whacky new textures and unlikely blends shown at Paris' two-yearly SIAL fair -- gathering 140,000 foodies from 100 nations -- point to an upcoming perestroika on the plate.

Driving the new mood is a fundamental shift in attitudes to food, said foodie guru Xavier Terlet, who heads the XTC trends agency.

Global tastes for healthy natural foods as well as the growing influence of the science-driven molecular cuisine practised by celeb chefs such as Britain's Heston Blumenthal or Spain's Ferran Adria are spawning a novel wave of products elbowing for space on main street supermarket shelves, he said.

"There used to be an aura of secrecy about cuisine, it was all about select chefs concocting recipes behind closed doors", Terlet told AFP. "And people used to hark after tradition in recipes and products, they wanted chequered table-cloths, to relive the old days.

"All that has changed," he added. "Molecular gastronomy has shown chefs are not just cooks but chemists, and that has brought a new boldness to the food industry, a modern-day daring to mix and play with textures."

"These creative possibilities now are being opened up to ordinary folk."

High priest of "molecular gastronomy" Adria, famed for "deconstructed" foods such as oyster meringue and liquid ravioli, could well claim for instance to be the inspiration behind the cans of whipped foams, or "espumas", developed for the average person by Britain's Imaginative Cuisine -- one of hundreds of novel foods showcased at the fair.

Top chefs like Adria or Blumenthal have dozens of helpers in the kitchen -- not the case for run-of-the-mill restaurants or common home cooks, said company director Rick Pott.

"This is skill in a can," said Pott, whose investment in technical research has earned him several SIAL awards for high-achieving food innovation.

Likewise, at the five-generation-old Calanquet family mill in the French olive-oil hub of Saint-Remy de Provence, where brother and sister team Anne and Gilles Brun are turning pulps into solids and pumping oil into fruit-juice.

Along with mix-n'-match olive-and-ginger or cocoa-and-orange jams, the pair are launching solid strawberry and olive chiplike snacks as well as natural fruit juices -- grapefruit/hibiscus or apple/verbena for example -- laced with olive oil.

"Olive oil for long has been known to help underline flavours," said Anne Brun. "We put a tiny dose into the juice which coats the palate and helps bring out the flavour of the fruit."

Successfully combining different textures in a single natural product turned out to be a trying three-year endeavour for old Swiss cheesemaker Val d'Arve which has just launched a soft cheese with a truffle inside.

"The challenge was to mature the cheese naturally, as we always have done, but keep the dual taste and dual texture," said manager Alain Meynier. "It was as difficult as making a Swiss watch to produce this without resorting to industrial processing methods, artificial colourings or preservatives."

Consumer demand for natural and/or organic products is stronger than ever in the global marketplace, said trend-watcher Terlet.

"There is a boom for health foods," he said, "not so much for function foods offering extra medical back-up, which are viewed as being too technical, but just for lots of fruit and veg and natural produce."

Switzerland's Val d'Arve said it was inspired to produce something new but natural from something old and natural after noting the growing popularity of industrial soft cheeses on the market.

The reasoning was the same for French honey-makers Les Ruchers du Gue, who were at the fair to find buyers for their bizarre Tex Mex and other spiced-up honeys.

"We want to move off the sad-looking honey shelf at the supermarket, that few people check out, and take our honey to new parts of the store," said Jean-Loup Andrey.

In his dream-world, the salty honeys would line up with the mustard et al in the grocery section along with the dried marigolds, cornflowers and roses produced by spice company Terre Exotique for use in salads, omelettes and the like.

The redfruit-laced honeys or vanilla bottle would vie for attention in the bakery section.

But on the other hand, only one in two of the thousands of new food products brought to Paris for the two-yearly event survive long enough to make it onto supermarket shelves.