



# Understanding guilt-free indulgence

Everyone wants to have their proverbial cake and eat it too. But as we learn more about the impact of diet on not just weight, but also long-term health, the pressure to eat more healthfully is growing. As a result, consumers are looking for new products that will help them minimize negative impacts of certain foods on health and weight. But these days, they also seek a bit of comfort, escapism and reward to address the difficulties of modern life.

For brands, it's a tall order – but one that offers significant and ongoing opportunity if they can strike the right balance between health and indulgence. The answer may lie in providing healthier foods and beverages that offer strong nutritional credentials, while also relieving some of the anxiety around diet choices by giving people permission to indulge, at least occasionally.

The idea of permissible indulgence is gaining traction and will likely have staying power. But it's not just about adding a trending ingredient or crafting the right marketing or positioning. First of all, it is important to understand consumers' complex and changing attitudes about their weight. Dieting and weight management remain top-of-mind for many consumers, and it's serious business because obesity is still a significant and rising public health issue. According to a recent report on obesity in America, the rate of obese U.S. adults reached 42.2% in 2020, the highest ever.<sup>1</sup>



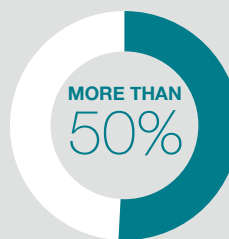
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According to recent data from FMCG Gurus, about three in 10 consumers are continuously looking to lose weight, and these consumers indicate that they see many barriers to success, such as hidden sugars in products and their desire to enjoy an indulgent treat.<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated weight concerns.

Three waves of consumer surveys by FMCG Gurus in 2020 noted that respondents became increasingly concerned about their waistlines (April, 21%; May, 32% and July, 37%) in the first half of the year.<sup>3</sup>

## A more holistic viewpoint

But there are also some positive shifts. Americans are starting to understand that the endgame may not be about simply losing weight, but rather maintaining a healthy, appropriate weight for them as an individual. This shift in thinking is evident in consumer motivations for improving the healthfulness of their diets.



**According to data from the International Food Information Council's 2020 Food and Health Survey, more than half of Americans made changes to improve the healthfulness of their diet.**

Their top reasons for making these adjustments involve a focus on improving overall well-being (59%) and physical health (58%). Losing weight, on the other hand, was down from a decade ago to 53%, while maintaining weight is on the rise, at about one in three.<sup>4</sup>

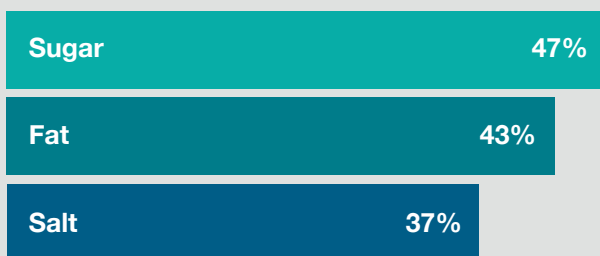
As consumers learn to cut themselves some slack, they're looking for ways to escape on occasion, so products that they perceive as nutritious and guilt-free give them permission to enjoy a moment of indulgence without concern about health or weight implications.<sup>5</sup>

## Delicate strategies

Catering to consumers at both ends of the spectrum presents some complex issues for product developers, but there are some good strategies for tackling guilt-free indulgence. Perhaps foremost is ingredient choice. According to a 2020 study on moderation and avoidance from GlobalData, 54% of global consumers noted they pay high or very high attention to the ingredients in their food and drink products.<sup>6</sup>

The report noted that sugar, fat and salt are the ingredients they are most likely to avoid.

### Ingredients actively avoiding



Source: GlobalData. "Brands Should Develop Guilt-Free Indulgences as Consumers Become More Cautious about Ingredients." January 8, 2020.

Sugar reduction, in particular, has been a key approach in healthier indulgence, and there are an increasing number of ingredients that offer functionality in product formulations while also meeting consumer expectations for taste, texture and mouthfeel.

Chief among them is stevia. Stevia extracts, which are sourced from the stevia plant, have been evolving over several years, and can now address various sugar-reduction goals with optimal taste and sweetness. As suppliers learned more about the sweet components in the stevia leaf, they have developed a new generation of the plant's sweetest components – Reb M and Reb D – to achieve up to 100% sugar reduction with improved flavor dynamics and sweetness. However, because the compounds are so rare, they are now created using the process of fermentation to produce ingredients that are great-tasting, sustainable and affordable.

Because sugar is a multi-purpose ingredient, it can seldom be replaced with just a single ingredient. While stevia is great for replicating sugar's sweetness, it often needs some help to reproduce sugar's bulk. Erythritol is another zero-calorie sweetener that provides this complementary function.

Another solution is chicory root fiber. This versatile ingredient can replace sugar's mouthfeel, texture and flavor, as well as act as a masking or bulking agent or serve as a fat mimetic. It also contains inulin, a well-known prebiotic fiber that has been shown to enhance a product's digestive health properties.<sup>7</sup> Often, these three ingredients together provide an optimal combination to replace sugar's functionality.

Another on-trend area of opportunity is plant-based proteins from sources like peas, legumes and soy. They can also provide a permissible boost to many products. Plant protein is a good fit with dairy desserts, but also works to enhance the perceived health value of confections and sweet bakery products.<sup>8</sup> These label-friendly ingredients offer well-understood health benefits, while broadening appeal as a generally healthier way to eat.

Positively worded product claims tend to be important in this category, according to analysts at GlobalData. This means that highlighting healthy ingredients is more important than calling out the lack of unhealthy ingredients, so claims like "plant-based" resonate more than "meat-free."<sup>9</sup>



## Fun and function

Beyond choosing the right ingredients, brands can reduce the guilt around products by making them fun, exotic or surprising. Consumers around the world – especially Millennials and Gen Z – are looking for products that provide novelty and fun at rates of more than 65%, with more than one in two North Americans noting this demand.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of food for exploration is being driven by our growing receptiveness to diversity and new experiences.<sup>11</sup> This means exotic new flavors, product mashups and even edible scents can provide an element of discovery that gives consumers permission to indulge. Creating a value proposition around fun is an experiential strategy, according to The Hartman Group. They suggest a product can drive consumer engagement by emphasizing whimsical or playful characteristics that help support quality-of-life goals.<sup>12</sup>

Positioning products to address multiple motivations, or a range of target consumers, is another way to add appeal and license for enjoyment. Snacks are a case-in-point, according to Hartman analysts. While the line is blurring between snacks for kids and parents, in this case it will be important to consider that parental expectations for snacks are multifold – offering good nutrition, while keeping kids from “sugar crashing” and also serving as a fun treat.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, providing consumers with a surprising and honestly indulgent product can justify gratification. Decadent treats in new formats with unique packaging and personalized elements, or home delivery, also give consumers the go-ahead to pamper themselves.<sup>14</sup> Brands need only think outside the box and then, when appropriate, be honest when the product is truly indulgent. Few consumers will have trouble seizing the opportunity.

**Cargill can help you develop innovative, guilt-free indulgences.**

Contact us at 1-800-932-0544 or [customerservice@cargill.com](mailto:customerservice@cargill.com).

<sup>1</sup> Trust for America's Health. "The State of Obesity 2020: Better Policies for a Healthier America." <https://www.tfah.org/report-details/state-of-obesity-2020/>

<sup>2</sup> Cowling, W. FMCG Gurus Data. 2019 Weight Management Survey. In: "Consumers will Seek Out Guilt-Free Treats in the Wake of COVID-19." *Food and Drink Technology*. August 25, 2020. <https://www.foodanddrinktechnology.com/feature/34412/consumers-will-look-out-guilt-free-treats-in-the-wake-of-covid-19/>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> International Food Information Council. "2020 Food and Health Survey." <https://foodinsight.org/2020-food-and-health-survey/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> GlobalData. "Brands Should Develop Guilt-Free Indulgences as Consumers Become More Cautious about Ingredients." January 8, 2020. <https://www.globaldata.com/brands-develop-guilt-free-indulgences-consumers-become-cautious-ingredients/>

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, B; Whelan, K. "Prebiotic Inulin-type Fructans and Galacto-oligosaccharides: Definition, Specificity, Function and Application in Gastrointestinal Disorders." *Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology*. 2017 Mar;32 Suppl 1:64-68. Doi:10.1111/jgh.13700

<sup>8</sup> Innova Market Insights. "Cutting Sugar and Boosting Protein in Better-for-You Sweet Treats." February. 24, 2021. <https://www.innovamarketinsights.com/cutting-sugar-and-boosting-protein-in-better-for-you-sweet-treats/>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Global Data.

<sup>10</sup> GfK Consumer Life Global, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> The Hartman Group. "Fun, Discovery and Pleasure: Essential Ingredients in Food Culture Today." February 20, 2018. <https://www.hartman-group.com/newsletters/1513943864/fun-discovery-and-pleasure-essential-ingredients-in-food-culture-today>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Mellentin, J. "Ten Key Trends in Food Nutrition and Health 2021." <https://www.new-nutrition.com/>

**Claims:** *The labeling, substantiation and decision making of all claims for your products is your responsibility. We recommend you consult regulatory and legal advisors familiar with all applicable laws, rules and regulations prior to making labeling and claims decisions.*