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Co-funded by the European Union

Insects Innovation in Gastronomy

COURSE SUPPORT

Episode 5: Insect-Based Ingredients: From Tradition to Food Innovation

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This project is co-funded with the support of the European Union.

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Project Number: 2023-1-ES01-KA220-VET-000150957

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Synopsis

The use of insects as a food resource is not a novelty, but its applications have evolved significantly over time. Traditional uses include products like shellac, a natural resin produced by Kerria lacca, used as a protective coating for fruits, candies, and supplements, and cochineal red (Dactylopius coccus), a natural dye widely used in beverages and confectionery. Today, insect-based ingredients are playing a central role in innovative food applications, including protein snacks, baked goods, and meat substitutes. One of the most promising frontiers is the integration of insect-based ingredients in 3D food printing, allowing for the creation of customized, high-protein, and sustainable food products.

Key Insights & Takeaways

Traditional Applications of Insect-Based Ingredients

- **Shellac**: A natural resin extracted mainly in India and Thailand, widely used as a food-grade coating. It protects products from moisture and microbial contamination while enhancing their appearance. However, its biological origin and limited availability can impact its cost and market accessibility.
- **Cochineal Red (Carminic Acid)**: A natural pigment derived from *Dactylopius coccus*, historically used in beverages, dairy products, and liqueurs like Campari. Its natural stability makes it a viable alternative to synthetic dyes.

Modern Applications in Food Production

- **High-Protein Ingredients**: Insect-derived flours, rich in proteins, enhance the functional properties of foods such as crackers, biscuits, and pasta, improving texture and shelf stability. Companies like Eat Grub (UK) and Fucibo (Italy) are pioneering insect-based food solutions that merge innovation and nutrition.
- **3D Food Printing**: Insect-derived ingredients exhibit high viscosity control and protein content, making them ideal for food printing applications. The ability to create customized food shapes and nutritional profiles has led to various pilot projects.

Key Research and Development Projects

1. **University and Research Center Initiatives**
    - **Wageningen University & Research (Netherlands)**: Studies the extrusion of *Tenebrio molitor* and cricket flours combined with plant-based ingredients for 3D food printing.

   - **TNO (Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research)**: Evaluates the printability and structural stability of alternative protein sources, including insect flours.
2. **Collaborations Between Startups and Food-Tech Companies**
   - **Natural Machines (Foodini)**: While primarily a generalist 3D food printer, it has been tested for insect-based pasta formulations.
   - **Crické and Other Startups**: Experimenting with printable insect-based doughs to assess taste, texture, and nutritional viability.
3. **European Sustainability Programs**
   - **ValuSect (Valuable Insects)**: A European consortium promoting insects as a sustainable protein source.
4. **Culinary and Gastronomic Research Institutions**
   - **Basque Culinary Center (Spain) and Future Food Institute (Italy)**: Exploring the integration of insect-based ingredients in 3D food printing.

Future Prospects and Challenges

The potential of insect-based food innovation is vast, especially in personalized nutrition. Applications include:

- **Senior Nutrition**: Customized, soft-textured foods for individuals with chewing difficulties.
- **Sports Nutrition**: High-protein printed foods tailored to athletic dietary needs.

However, challenges remain, particularly in scaling production and standardizing insect-based ingredients. Significant investments in research and regulatory frameworks are essential to ensure food safety, quality, and consumer acceptance

Final Thought

The evolution of insect-based ingredients from traditional applications to modern food innovations highlights their potential in sustainable nutrition. Advances in 3D food printing further expand possibilities, creating functional, customizable, and aesthetically appealing foods. Addressing scalability and regulatory concerns will be crucial in integrating insect-based products into mainstream diets.

Further Reading & Sources:

European Food Safety Authority (EFSA): www.efsa.europa.eu

FAO Report on Edible Insects: www.fao.org

Regulation (EU) 2015/2283 on Novel Foods: eur-lex.europa.eu

Scientific Publications on Insect-Based Ingredients (Google Scholar, ResearchGate))