



Breaking News on Food & Beverage Development - North America

Supplier of tart cherry ground meat enhancer eyes retail market

By Maggie Hennessy, 13-Dec-2013

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A longtime school foodservice supplier of meat enhancer is looking to get its flavorless, tart cherry-based blend—which it claims can increase product yield, extend shelf life, reduce fat content, lower cost and decrease the carcinogenic effect of cooking—into the meat processing market and ultimately on supermarket shelves.

"For the last 18 years, BLENDit has been in school foodservice in 14 states," said David Mathia, president of Pleva International, which produces BLENDit, told FoodNavigator-USA. "I joined the company a year and a half ago to help change the strategy to selling ingredients to meat processors in the US. We've spent the last 12 months figuring out who to talk to and have been negotiating with several large retail providers—big box and grocery, as well as the processors themselves. Our strategy is to go after both."

Fat reduction without losing juiciness

Pleva International's proprietary BLENDit ingredient incorporates fully ripe IQF tart cherries, oat fiber for binding and spices, though the firm declined to specify the exact ratio of BLENDit to meat. It appears on ingredient labels as "cherries", "oat fiber" and "spices".

"Ingredient lists run from 10% to 26% of the cherry itself—and that's the biggest factor—depending on the proprietary formula desire by the client," Mathia said. "Unlike a powder or concentrate that's 1 to 1.5% yield, whatever we add gives bulk to the product."

Materials from the company claim that BLENDit added to beef that is 85% lean will take the beef to 86 ¾% lean.

"Typically, having a product that's healthy, juicy and tastes good usually couldn't be said in the same sentence," said Pleva CEO Cindy Pleva-Weber. "A low-fat burger tended to be drier or had ingredients in there that might not have been pleasing to public and the palate. On the other hand, cherries added to a lean ground meat give the consumer the better tasting, juiciness of a higher fat burger, but you don't get that higher fat content," she claimed.

Adding cherries to the ground meat mixture is also less expensive than using protein alone, which Pleva-Weber claims can result in "notable" cost savings to manufacturers over time.

This isn't the first time fruit has been incorporated into burgers for a reduced fat option. A few years ago, the trend hit big in the higher-end dining segment, with Donald Trump's

Sixteen hotel restaurant in Chicago, the Mar-A-Lago Club in Palm Beach, FL, and The Cherry Hut in Beulah, MI, incorporating blueberries, cherries, cranberries and apple chunks into their burgers for added juiciness and health benefits that even caught Oprah's attention in a 2009 show.

But unlike those incorporations, BLENDit's cherries aren't meant to be seen or tasted.

"It's a beautiful thing that one ingredient, the tart cherry, can solve a lot of issues and answer a lot of problems for a vast array of people. Plus, it doesn't impart a flavor, so you don't have that issue," Pleva-Weber said. *"We've incorporated the cherries into chicken, turkey, pork, bison, venison, even salami with good results. With the ground white meat chicken you'd think you would see the cherries, but you do not."*

If clients do want a flavor profile introduced, *"we have several—probably 70 or more that they can choose from,"* Mathia added.

Growing number of studies on tart cherry benefits

Recently published research suggests that tart cherries can support healthy inflammatory response, slow lipid peroxidation and increase antioxidant capacity in the blood, as well as boost exercise recovery and improve sleep quality and duration .



Pleva also points to an almost 20-year-old study published in the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* by Michigan State University researchers, which purported that the antioxidant properties of tart cherries can keep pre-cooked meat from having a "warmed-over" flavor—characteristic of fast-onset rancidity in cooked, refrigerated meat—when reheated, as well as extend shelf life in fresh proteins.

"Oxidation was significantly influenced by the addition of tissue from two varieties of tart cherries, Montmorency and Balaton," the authors wrote. *"Thiobarbituric acid-reactive substances values for raw and cooked ground beef patties containing cherry tissue were significantly smaller than those for the control beef patties. Cholesterol oxidation was also influenced by the presence of cherry tissue. After 4 days of refrigerated storage, cholesterol oxides represented 5.2% of the total cholesterol content of cooked control beef patties and 2.0 and 1.7% of the total cholesterol in patties containing Montmorency and Balaton cherry tissue, respectively. The formation of mutagenic/carcinogenic HAAs (heterocyclic aromatic amines) during frying of the patties was inhibited by components in the cherry tissue."*

"The results clearly demonstrate that cherry tissue effectively inhibits the development of oxidation and rancidity in both raw and cooked ground beef patties during storage. The antioxidant mechanism of cherry tissue is not completely understood, but recent studies indicate that anthocyanin components have significant antioxidant activity."

Mathia noted that research on the health benefits of tart cherries is ongoing, more recently at Central Michigan University, adding that BLENDit may offer a "clean label, cost saving" solution for meat processors and ultimately the end consumer.

"The thing to remember is, nature provided us this solution without taking away whatever flavor profile client is trying to achieve, that is just going to make it juicier and healthier with the added benefit of antioxidants," he claimed.

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