

564

FOOD MARKETING & ECONOMICS GROUP

1477 Drew Avenue, Suite 104
Davis, California 95616

phone: 916 753-1632
fax: 916 756-6499

WILD RICE ATTITUDES & USAGE

*The Results of a Study of
Consumers & Chefs*

prepared for:

CALIFORNIA WILD RICE ADVISORY BOARD
January, 1995

SUMMARY

KEY FINDINGS FROM WILD RICE USAGE & ATTITUDE SURVEYS

The California Wild Rice Advisory Board commissioned a study regarding consumers' and chefs' usage and attitudes of wild rice. The key findings are summarized below.

A. CONSUMER INTERVIEWS

Telephone interviews were completed with 245 wild rice users and 121 nonusers in California during November, 1994. Consumers were qualified as wild rice users if they had purchased any product containing wild rice in the past 12 months.

- * 37% of consumers were users of wild rice products. 21% had never tried wild rice and 40% had never purchased a product containing wild rice.
- * Users' top-of-mind impressions of wild rice related primarily to a visual characteristic (color, shape) or food dish.
- * Users had purchased an average of 11 packages of wild rice products during the past 12 months. Since 38% were light users (1-3 packages) and 42% were medium users (4-12 packages), there is much opportunity to increase wild rice consumption by encouraging current users to buy more wild rice products.
- * Seasoned mixes containing wild rice and white or brown rice are the favored product form. Such products are quick and easy to cook. Uncle Ben's was the most popular brand, followed by Rice-A-Roni and Farmhouse (formerly MJB).
- * Virtually all consumers buy wild rice products at the grocery store. However, a surprisingly large proportion of the users (20%) also reported buying wild rice products at club stores also, such as Price Club/Costco.
- * Wild rice products are "impulse" items; 58% of the users usually purchase wild rice products after seeing them on the store shelf, rather than putting them specifically on their shopping lists.
- * Most consumers serve wild rice as a side dish; very few are inclined to use it in a stuffing.

- * Wild rice products do not suffer the stigma of being reserved for just holiday or company meals; the readily available seasoned mixes encourage most consumers to serve them for everyday meals, as well as on special occasions.
- * Consumers are most likely to serve wild rice in a meal with chicken as the main course.
- * Almost half of the wild rice users cited "tastes good" as the main reason why they like wild rice.
- * Among 7 attributes, users rated wild rice the highest for its taste and nutritional properties, and lowest for being a good value.
- * Only 37% of wild rice users knew that wild rice is grown in California, and 9% knew that it was grown in Minnesota.
- * Compared to nonusers, wild rice users are more likely to try out new recipes, buy specialty food items and exercise strenuously.
- * Users of products containing wild rice are more likely to read Sunset regularly than nonusers.
- * There are numerous demographic characteristics which distinguish wild rice users from nonusers. Wild rice users are more likely than nonusers to have children at home, work full-time (nonusers were more likely to be retired), have attended college, be Caucasian, and have annual household incomes of \$75,000 or more.

The results of this consumer research suggest a focussed positioning for the Wild Rice Board's promotional activities with consumers-- *"for food lovers with busy lifestyles"*. A "happy homemaker" image does not fit wild rice users. They do not bake cakes or pies from scratch any more frequently than do nonusers!

Although wild rice users are concerned about the fat and fiber in their diets, a healthy eating positioning is not recommended. This positioning theme is overused and tiresome. It would be more productive for the promotional materials to provide recipes and serving suggestions (some which are low-fat) that demonstrate the versatility of wild rice. Most consumers use wild rice as a side dish; some recipes for quick and easy-to-prepare main dishes and salads would also emphasize its versatility.

Even though seasoned wild rice mixes do not contain much wild rice, they should be the focus product for the Board's consumer promotion activities. The relatively long cooking time and cost of unblended wild rice limit it to the gourmet food market for special meals. It would also be most productive for the Board to limit its consumer promotion activities to California for the next 2-3 years.

B. CHEF INTERVIEWS

One-on-one interviews were conducted with 10 chefs at white tablecloth restaurants in the San Francisco and Sacramento metropolitan areas during November, 1994.

- * The chefs prepared wild rice dishes from scratch, rather than using mixes like most consumers.
- * Although the chefs used wild rice, they did not know much about--basic cooking methods, nutritional properties, geographic origin.
- * Wild rice is underpromoted to chefs. It has not been brought to their attention or promoted with other ingredients. They get such materials from other commodity promotion boards.
- * The chefs usually served wild rice as a side dish. However, they had developed a broad range of dishes containing wild rice, including salads, main courses and soups.
- * The chefs rated wild rice particularly highly for its flavor, texture and appearance, especially when compared to other grain products. They also perceived it as nutritious.
- * Although the chefs stated that they could use and do use wild rice year round, they admitted to using it more during the Fall because it seemed to fit so naturally with game birds and other wild game.
- * The chefs varied in their assessment of the serving properties of wild rice. Because of its dark color, some do not serve wild rice with dark meats or dark sauces, while others do not serve with fish.

The interview results suggest that *"year-round versatility"* would be an effective positioning for promoting wild rice with chefs. Unblended wild rice would be the targeted product. Promotion materials would focus on providing a broad range of recipes using wild rice--specialty side dishes, salads, main dishes--and basic cooking instructions. Information on nutritional content and growing regions can be included, but not stressed; doing so would dilute the *"year-round versatility"* positioning.

Public relations efforts directed at culinary trade publications should be well received. Promotional materials could be distributed through mailings to members of culinary trade groups within California. Chefs could also demonstrate the versatility of wild rice at these groups' meetings. As in the case of the consumer promotion activities, it would be most productive for the Board to limit its food service promotion activities to California for the next 2-3 years.

