

Tradition on a Plate: Giving Southeast Asia's Favourite Foods a Healthier Future

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Every August, countries in Southeast Asia come alive with expressions of national pride. Flags appear outside homes, familiar songs return to the airwaves, and communities gather to reflect on where their countries have come from and where they are going. ASEAN Day falls on 8 August, followed closely by Singapore's National Day on 9 August, Indonesia's Independence Day on 17 August and Malaysia's National Day on 31 August.

Here, national identity is not only expressed through parades, speeches or monuments. It is also often found around the dining table.

Ask someone what home tastes like, and the answer is rarely an expensive restaurant meal. It may be the kaya bun picked up before school, the biscuit tin opened when relatives visit, or the familiar malted or milky drinks that have long been part of breakfast tables across the region. These familiar foods carry memories of childhood, family and community. They are part of

the region's cultural fabric.

But pride in our food heritage does not mean every recipe must remain frozen in time.

The way Southeast Asians live, work and eat is changing. At the same time, people are paying closer attention to how their everyday choices affect their health. Recent consumer research found that 55 per cent of consumers in Thailand and 53 per cent in Indonesia consider themselves health-conscious^[1]. More than half of those surveyed in both countries also felt there were not enough healthy products that could be easily incorporated into their daily routines.

This presents food manufacturers with an important opportunity: not simply to introduce another niche health product, but to make the foods people already know and enjoy work harder for their wellbeing.

Heritage Should Evolve, Not Disappear

Too often, conversations about better nutrition are framed around restriction. People are told to abandon the foods they grew up with, resist every indulgence or replace familiar favourites with products that may feel disconnected from their culture.

That approach overlooks something fundamental: food is emotional.

A much more realistic path is thoughtful reformulation — keeping the character of a product while improving what sits beneath the surface. The goal should not be to turn a cherished snack into something unrecognisable. It should be to retain the taste, appearance and experience people love while making considered changes to its nutritional profile.

Doing so is not always straightforward. Sugar, for example, does much more than provide sweetness. It also contributes to a product's texture, mouthfeel, volume, structure, colour and browning. To successfully reduce it therefore requires a tailored approach rather than simply removing one ingredient and hoping consumers will accept the result.

Fortunately, manufacturers can benefit from a toolbox of functional ingredients and application know-how that offer them versatile options for reformulation.

For instance, Isomalt, a sugar replacer derived from beet sugar, can help create sugar-free or -reduced confectionery and baked goods while delivering a sweetness profile close to that of sugar. It contains half the calories of sugar and is tooth-friendly, while its technical characteristics help manufacturers maintain the appearance and texture expected in indulgent applications. Its low hygroscopicity helps prevent stickiness and supports longer shelf life of hard-boiled candy for example, while its processing properties allow for precise multi-layer and filled candy designs. .

The prebiotic chicory root fibres inulin and oligofructose can support sugar reduction and fibre enrichment. Depending on the formulation, they can provide natural sweetness, help mask the off-taste of intense sweeteners and contribute to a creamy texture or fuller mouthfeel.

These are changes consumers usually don't see or taste. In many cases, the best reformulation is the one that quietly improves a product while allowing the familiar experience to remain.

Improve Foods That People Already Eat

Healthier eating becomes more achievable when it fits naturally into daily life.

Consider fibre. Consumers across Southeast Asia increasingly understand that digestive health is connected to overall wellbeing. BENEÓ's research found that 73 per cent of Indonesian consumers and 58% of Thai consumers associate prebiotics with digestive health, while one in five respondents in the two countries already consumes prebiotic foods or supplements^[2].

However, people should not have to overhaul their entire diet or seek out highly specialised products to increase their intake. Dietary fibre can be incorporated into familiar categories such as baked goods, dairy products, beverages, cereals and snacks — the products already found in kitchen cupboards, lunchboxes and convenience stores.

Chicory root fibres – inulin and oligofructose –are the most researched prebiotics, backed by over 30 years of scientific studies. They are the only plant-based ones available and belong to the few proven prebiotics complying with the ISAPP^[3] definition^[4]. They selectively nourish beneficial bacteria in the gut and have been shown to support a range of health aspects, from blood sugar management^[ii], immune health^[iii], calcium absorption for bone health^[iv]·v], weight management^[vi], and even mood^[vii]. At the same time, they provide both nutritional and technical advantages within food formulations – by combining sugar or fat reduction with enhanced fibre content.

The principle is simple: rather than expecting consumers to build entirely new habits, manufacturers can bring better nutrition into the habits that already exist.

Look Beyond How Much Sugar a Product Contains

Reformulation should also consider carbohydrate quality.

Carbohydrates remain an important source of energy, but they are not all metabolised in the same way. Rapidly available carbohydrates can cause blood glucose levels to rise and fall quickly. In contrast, low-glycaemic carbohydrates are digested and absorbed more slowly, providing a steadier release of energy. One example is Palatinose™, also known as isomaltulose, which is fully digested but releases its carbohydrate energy more slowly and steadily because of its low-glycaemic profile – eliminating blood sugar spikes..

This creates possibilities across beverages, baked goods, cereals and snack products intended for people balancing long working days, school, family responsibilities and active lifestyles. Instead of focusing only on reducing calories, manufacturers can consider how a product supplies energy and whether it supports consumers over a longer period.

It is an important shift in thinking. Better nutrition is not always about taking something away. Sometimes, it is about choosing a more appropriate ingredient to perform the same role.

There Is No Single Southeast Asian Palate

Although countries across the region share ingredients, culinary influences and eating occasions, each market has its own preferences and expectations. Even the same types of foods enjoyed across Southeast Asia — from biscuits and cakes to ready-to-drink beverages — may differ considerably in sweetness, texture, portion size or flavour from one country to another.

Reformulation therefore cannot be approached as a universal formula.

A healthier version of a familiar food must still feel authentic to the people eating it. That requires manufacturers to understand not only nutrition science but also local recipes, sensory preferences, price expectations and eating habits. The experts in BENEÓ's food application laboratory in Singapore support food manufacturers in reformulating familiar food and drink products while maintaining or improving taste and texture. The combination of regional expertise with plant-based ingredient solutions spanning functional fibres, carbohydrates, proteins and speciality rice ingredients allows to create better-for-you options that fit into consumers' lifestyles, such as reduced sugar kaya spread and lower cholesterol instant noodles.

Regional pride should encourage this kind of local innovation. Food and drink producers in Southeast Asia do not need to copy health trends from elsewhere or replace its food traditions with imported ideas. Instead, they can build their own solutions around the foods, flavours and occasions that already matter to its people.

Keeping Tradition Relevant for the Next Generation

The foods we associate with home did not appear out of nowhere. Recipes have always evolved as ingredients became available, lifestyles changed and one generation adapted the traditions of the last.

Reformulation is another chapter in that story.

The challenge for the food industry is to approach it with respect: improving nutritional value without erasing identity, or losing the pleasure and connection that make food meaningful in the first place.

As many Southeast Asian countries celebrate their stories and histories this August, it is worth remembering that national pride and sense of identity looks in two directions. It honours what previous generations created, but it also asks what today's people will leave behind for the next one.

Giving familiar foods a healthier future does not weaken their heritage. Done well, it helps ensure that the tastes people grew up loving remain relevant, enjoyable and better suited to the generations still to come.

[1] [BENEÓ](#) Global Prebiotic Survey 2023. Quantitative survey conducted by One Inch Whale (N= n=9,000 across 9 countries; incl. 2,009 participants in Thailand and Indonesia)

[2] [BENEÓ](#) Global Prebiotic Survey 2023. Quantitative survey conducted by One Inch Whale (N= n=9,000 across 9 countries; incl. 2,009 participants in Thailand and Indonesia)

[3] International Scientific Association for Probiotics and Prebiotics

[i] Gibson GR, Hutkins R, Sanders ME et al. (2017) Expert consensus document: The International Scientific Association for Probiotics and Prebiotics (ISAPP) consensus statement on the definition and scope of prebiotics. *Nat Rev Gastroenterol Hepatol* 14(8): 491–502. <https://www.nature.com/articles/nrgastro.2017.75.pdf> See also: <https://isappscience.org/>

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[vii] Jackson PPJ, Wijeyesekera A, Williams CM, Theis S, van Harsselaar J, Rastall RA, (2023) Inulin-type fructans and 2'fucosyllactose alter both microbial composition and appear to alleviate stress-induced mood state in a working population compared to placebo (maltodextrin): the EFFICAD Trial, a randomized, controlled trial. *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. Published 29 August 2023, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajcnut.2023.08.016>