

Company shakes up sauerkraut's reputation

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Forget, for a moment, the smell and the gas-inducing qualities. Think beyond Oktoberfest and elderly folks in lederhosen.

Think, instead, of sauerkraut as sexy.

If Chris Smith has his way, that's how people -- which is to say: young, hip people -- will start to view the much-maligned fermented cabbage.

Smith, 36, is vice president of marketing for the Ohio-based Fremont Co., one of the nation's largest sauerkraut producers and maker of the Frank's brand of sauerkraut. His great-grandfather started the company in 1905. Nearly 100 years later, Smith is on a mission to reinvent sauerkraut as a versatile, healthy and, yes, sexy food. With the help of Chicago marketing firm BIGfrontier, the Fremont Co. is pushing to sell younger consumers on the fermented vegetable, starting with a kraut-inspired cocktail being introduced today at the swanky Rush Street nightclub Le Passage. People will be served "K'Tinis" -- martinis with sauerkraut-stuffed, vermouth-marinated olives. Similar events are planned for Miami and New York.

Sexy, really?

"Sauerkraut, in and of itself, is probably not the most sexy food, but I love the idea of putting it in olives and serving it in the sexiest club in Chicago," says Le Passage's Jen Hansen. "It's gonna take people by surprise."

The real surprise might be if it works. Smith acknowledges that people who buy and eat sauerkraut are overwhelmingly older and of ethnic backgrounds.

But it might work. Consider the extreme food makeover of prunes -- er, dried plums. In 2001, plum growers successfully lobbied the government for permission to start calling the shriveled fruit dried plums. A year after the name change, sales spiked 4 percent, according to the California Dried Plum Board.

Smith says he doesn't worry that sauerkraut's stink might keep him from winning over younger audiences. As with garlic, he says, "I think the flavor and healthful benefits outweigh that side of it. And not everybody has that reaction to it, either."

Sauerkraut has its pluses. It's fat-free, low-carb and packed with vitamin C and fiber -- all of which Smith plans to use as selling points.

And, he says, besides being a condiment or side dish, it can work in soups, breads, even desserts. Hmm. Among the recipes posted on the Fremont Web site, there's one for chocolate sauerkraut cake.

"It's just really a versatile product," says Smith.

Extreme food makeovers

Other foods that have undergone major makeovers to make them more palatable to the public: Kiwi fruit: Was Chinese gooseberry. California produce buyer Frieda Caplan is credited with bringing it from its native New Zealand to the United States in 1962 and dubbing it kiwi fruit, after a New Zealand bird.

Chilean sea bass: Was Patagonian toothfish. In the late 1980s, marketers renamed it, and its popularity soared in upscale restaurants and markets.

Sunchoke: Was Jerusalem artichoke. Caplan rechristened this one, too. Her reasoning: This vegetable, which resembles ginger, is neither an artichoke nor is it native to Jerusalem.
Janet Rausa Fuller

The "K'Tini" is a martini served with olives stuffed with Frank's sauerkraut and marinated in vermouth. CHART; SEE BELOW.

Fremont Co.

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