

Instant noodle evolution

Nissin chief eyes healthier, less salty fare

By SEAN YOONG
The Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR — More than a half-century after his father invented instant noodles to feed Japan's war-ravaged masses, Koki Ando says it is time to change the high-calorie, salt-laden fast food into healthier fare.

This week, Ando chaired a World Instant Noodles Summit that brought together manufacturers to focus on the food's future: less salt to lure health-conscious customers, better environmental standards and a bigger push for corporate responsibility by donating noodles to disaster victims.



Hungry?: Cups of instant noodles made by Nestle Malaysia are arranged for display at the World Instant Noodle Summit in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday. AP PHOTO

"Evolution is very important" for the noodle industry, the chief executive of Nissin Foods Holdings said at the end of the two-day meeting in Kuala Lumpur of representatives from nearly 50 companies.

Last year, more than 92 billion servings of instant noodles were sold, Ando told a news conference late Wednesday. "I hope our noodles can reach 100 billion servings per year soon."

The product's popularity has soared since Ando's father, Momofuku Ando, introduced Chicken Ramen — the first instant noodle product — in 1958 as a convenient recipe to help counter food shortages in postwar Japan.

Ando now heads the company founded by his father, who died three years ago at age 96.

But Ando isn't content to only churn out noodles the old-fashioned way. Like other noodle makers, Nissin is fighting to jettison its product's reputation as calorie-laden food that lacks nutrition.

Concoctions launched in recent years that touted health benefits were on colorful display at the noodle conference, including Nissin Light cup noodles, which are layered with fiber, sprayed with minimal oil instead of being deep-fried and contain nearly one-third fewer calories than regular versions.

In Malaysia, leading manufacturer Maggi is promoting Tastylite soup noodles made of whole wheat, with every packet providing the same amount of fiber as nearly 1 1/2 slices of whole wheat bread. Monde Nissin Corp. in the Philippines offers noodles supplemented with calcium.

Ando, 62, believes the stiffest challenge is curbing salt in noodles.

"We have to do it gradually, step by step," said Ando, who claims to eat 500 servings of instant noodles each year. "Our longtime customers enjoy the salt in our noodles, so we cannot simply reduce it just like that."

Ecological concerns are also on the companies' agenda: Nissin has set targets to cut carbon emissions and water usage in its manufacturing. Other manufacturers are replacing Styrofoam packaging with plastic and paper containers that can either be reused or recycled.

The companies, which have staged the Noodle Summit once every two years in various locations since 1997, also issued a "Kuala Lumpur Declaration" that pledges to reinforce their global fund for the swift supply of noodles to disaster-stricken communities.

Over the past two years, companies in the World Instant Noodles Association have donated 1.8 million servings of noodles to victims of earthquakes in Haiti, China and Indonesia, the cyclone in Myanmar, flooding in India, a typhoon in the Philippines and other natural calamities.

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