

Good Taste

Will food be the number-one use for hemp in the future?

Richard Rose, president of HempNut Inc., thinks so.

by Gabe Kirchheimer

now you can wear your hemp and eat it too: the hemp-food market is about to explode! Hemp edibles have arrived, and with the potential to outdistance all other categories of hemp commerce, 1999 promises to be the year hemp is eaten seriously.

This gustatory hemp revolution is being led by food pioneer Richard Rose and a versatile new product which promises to vastly broaden hemp foods' horizons. Rose is CEO of the Rella Good Cheese Company (formerly Sharon's Finest), president of HempNut Inc., and the founder of the newly established Hemp Food Association. The product is Rose's HempNut hulled hempseed, which may forever change consumers' perception of hemp food.

In a nutshell, the absence of hulls means hempseed can now be used to make a myriad of common foods more nutritious, and hempfoods more delicious. Although other companies will also soon be marketing products made from hulled seed, Rose's vast experience places him at the head of the pack.

At 42, Rose has spent nearly two decades in food manufacturing. He started by making tofu and tofu products in the 80s, distributing regionally and then nationally. His Sharon's Finest Cottage Salad became the best-selling tofu salad in the country, moving 10,000 pounds a week. After the introduction of ToFuRella cheese substitute, and the subsequent addition of VeganRella, Zero-FatRella and AlmondRella, Rose shut down his tofu operation to concentrate on the Rella Good line of



Richard Rose has no problem being nuts over HempNut.

cheese alternatives.

The addition of HempRella in September 1994 turned over a new leaf for the hemp food industry, a seven-pointed leaf which appeared in neon green on packages sold from coast to coast. HempRella became the company's most successful product introduction ever; in 1998, Rella Good sold two million units of product including an impressive 350,000 packages of original and smoked HempRella, which contains 5% hempseed.

Rose, who describes his advocacy of hemp "as a personal mission, almost spiritual in nature," and says he donates all company profits to charity, believes that 90% of HempRella buyers are interested in the political issue. "The reason there's a big old leaf on the package is because I wanted to bring it out," he says. "We made the political statement, we brought it out of the closet for people to talk about. We

were trying to get people to understand that you could actually make food out of it."

In the summer of 1995 Rose unveiled the Hempteh Burger, a soy tempeh patty with 10% crunchy hempseeds, in a more subdued package. Orders for both products from as far as Canada, Europe and Japan have indicated vast market potential.

Now, HempNut Inc. is poised to dramatically invigorate the industry as Rose prepares to import 400,000 pounds of certified organic hulled hempseed from Germany this year, and possibly purchase and process some of Canada's two-million-pound seed surplus as well. Planned products include HempNut oil, hempseed butter, hemp milk packaged in soy-milk-style aseptic containers, a chocolate bar, powdered "hemp-scream" ice-cream mix, defatted protein powder and protein isolate (much better than soy, claims Rose),



and HempNut powder for pasta and baked goods.

A 12-oz. package of whole HempNut will retail for about \$10. "I have yet to see a product that could not be made with hempseed, or improved by adding hempseed, either for flavor or nutrition," boasts Rose. "Hempfoods will be far bigger and become a much larger industry than soyfoods are today. Hemp food can be literally in anything in the supermarket."

Why hulled hempseed? Apart from solving the problem of those pesky hulls getting stuck in one's teeth, it's more nutritious, as the seed is not heated, thus preserving vitamins and enzymatic activity. Hemp hulls contain little nutritional value other than fiber and carbohydrates. "Use of whole seed causes darkening and microbiological contamination," Rose insists. "Whole seed is crap."

Rose asserts that HempNut oil will

be "the finest oil on the shelf": clear, stable and uncontaminated, and free of THC. Trace amounts of the notorious psychoactive chemical can adhere to hulls, wind up in hemp oil and food products and concentrate after ingestion in the bladder. A spate of lawsuits has resulted, filed by fired employees and members of the military claiming that consumption of hemp products skewed their drug tests.

Far and away the biggest problem currently threatening the embryonic industry is a severe shortage of imported hempseed, which is required by the US Drug Enforcement Administration to be rendered incapable of germination prior to sale. Last July ETO Sterilization, a company in Linden, NJ that held the only DEA license to neuter hempseed, relinquished their DEA registration due to undisclosed problems with the US Food

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and Drug Administration. According to ETO VP of Operations Karen Burns, "When we began processing hempseed here in 1992 it was only for birdseed. Now it's going to the brewing companies and all over the place. FDA requires anything for human consumption must be registered. I don't believe hemp will be accepted by the FDA." Many birdseed manufacturers are now said to be revising their mixes to exclude hempseed. No other company has been granted a sterilization license, and imports of whole hempseed have ceased.

Rose isn't worried. "Part of me is standing on the sidelines amused at all this problem with THC and sterilization, because the simple fact is that if everyone went to hulled hempseed they would get out of both those problems. There is no THC in it, none, and it isn't necessary to sterilize it because the act of taking

the shell off makes it incapable of germinating."

Rose faces other problems, however. The anti-hemp sentiment he encountered upon HempRella's introduction may limit HempNut's exposure. "Although HempRella is the most nutritious cheese alternative made because of the addition of hempseed with its essential fatty acids and high-quality protein, we were told flat-out by many people that if we took the green leaf off the package they would sell it. We're still banned by some distributors and, in fact, all our Rellas have been taken off the shelves of Whole Foods [the country's largest natural-foods chain] essentially because of our support for hemp products. They wouldn't even let us talk to them about hemp foods."

In spite of these obstacles, Rose believes that the future market for hemp foods in the USA and around the world is tremendous, for sound economic reasons. Farmers growing hemp for seed can also sell the pulp for paper and other products, while crops grown for fiber can only be used for textiles. The vast majority of Canada's 1998 hemp harvest was grown for seed-oil and pulp. A 1998 reader survey conducted by a trade journal found that 41% of the respondents purchased hempseed or seed-oil for resale, edging out textiles (40%), and second only to body-care products (43%). The writing is on the wall.

"I think that in ten years the biggest part of the hemp industry will be in food," predicts Rose, whose Hemp Food Association has garnered 67 members since last May. "I think it will eclipse textiles and pulp. Textiles are very expensive. You can't grow for seed and fiber at the same time. Therefore the farmers will say, 'I'm losing money growing for textiles.' I believe the biggest demand in five years for hemp will be for pulp for paper, and seed for food or oil. If you grow for textiles you have to get more money for it, because you're not getting the double-cropping. We're in a worldwide fiber shortage for paper, so there's more demand for fiber for paper than for textiles. If you grow for paper you'll also grow seed for food. How often do you buy jeans, and how often do you eat?" ♦