

Oldways Conference Promotes Whole-Grain Awareness

NOVEMBER 09, 2007 -- During the "Just Ask for Whole Grains" Conference held this week in Kansas City, healthy eating advocates and the nation's food industry leaders gathered together for a three-day discussion on ways to make whole grains available everywhere Americans eat — home kitchens, grocery stores, schools, restaurants and even the military. The three-day conference was organized by Oldways, the Boston-based food issues think tank, and the Whole Grains Council.

K. Dun Gifford, Oldways founder and president, said consumers — especially parents of school children — have to make it clear that they want healthier choices, whether they're eating at home, school or in restaurants.

"We are more confident than ever that the consumer now understands the health benefits of eating whole grains," he said during the conference. "It's clear that people want to eat healthier, but they are looking for help to reach their goals. We've definitely overcome some barriers and now we're up against some more."

Much of the discussion centered on institutional barriers to increasing the use of whole grains, with schools cited as the most important but most difficult system to change due to the "financial crisis" school districts often face.

Oldways and the Whole Grain Council said they have had more success in restaurants, in part because of a "Just Ask for Whole Grains" grassroots campaign launched in March 2007 that encourages people to make it clear they prefer whole grains. The goal of the campaign is to help convince America's restaurant and foodservice operations to offer at least one whole grain choice on their menus.

More than one-fifth of the meals Americans eat are purchased in restaurants and other foodservice venues. Restaurants account for 82 percent of these meals, while the rest are eaten in places like schools, military facilities, office buildings, hospitals, nursing homes, prisons, and day care centers — which, according to whole grain advocates, is where an increase in whole grains can make the most difference.

Gifford said the next steps are to offer more whole grain products, expand their availability and to continue educational efforts.

Just last year alone, over 1,500 new whole grain products were launched — almost double the year before — and whole grain flour milling was up a surprising 26 percent. More than 1,400 products now bear the Whole Grain Stamp, with all of General Mills' 80+ Big G cereals recently joining the list — proving that whole grains have captured an ever-increasing share of interest from manufacturers and consumers alike.

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