ABSTRACT
Grains, seeds, and pulses are important sources of energy in the human diet. In response to consumer demands for healthy, natural, and naturally processed foods, interest in sprouted grains has increased over the last decade, as demonstrated by the increasing number of sprouted grain products being launched every year. In this article, we discuss some of the reasons for the growing consumer interest in sprouted grains and how food manufacturers can take advantage of the “healthy halo” that surrounds these grains. Although there are regulatory challenges in communicating the nutritional and health benefits associated with sprouted grains to consumers, there are other qualities that differentiate sprouted from nonsprouted grains that can be used to promote the consumption of sprouted grains, most notably their unique flavor profiles.

Cereals, pseudocereals, and pulses are important components of most diets, providing good sources of energy, as well as macro- and micronutrients. Their consumption as whole grains is promoted based on their nutrient content and the health benefits they offer. In addition, a global consumer study conducted by Puratos in 2015 ([Taste Tomorrow, www.tastetomorrow.com/research]) shows that consumers are demanding health-promoting foods and ingredients that come directly from the earth or have been processed using natural methods. Sprouted grains fit perfectly with this consumer quest for health-promoting products. Sprouting is a natural process that occurs when a grain transforms into a plant and has been used since ancient times to enhance the nutritional value of grains. The process is somewhat similar to malting, which is used extensively in the brewing and distilling industries. However, malted grains are produced using additional processing steps (e.g., removal of the rootlet and culm and roasting), and their applications, flavors, and functionality (e.g., the enzymes remain active) differentiate malted from sprouted grains (23). This article will focus on sprouted grains.

According to legend, more than 5,000 years ago Chinese physicians prescribed consumption of sprouted grains to treat several disorders. In the 1700s, sailors consumed sprouts during long voyages to prevent scurvy, a disease caused by a lack of vitamin C in the diet. Shurtleff and Aoyagi (33) report that in the early 1940s Dr. Clive McKay, professor of nutrition at Cornell University, and his team began studying the properties of sprouted soybeans. They found that sprouted soybeans contained high levels of both vitamins A and C and also retained levels of B vitamins similar to those present in the original (non-sprouted) seed (33). In spite of these benefits, until recently harvested sprouted grains were typically considered to be defective, as indicated in European Regulation (EU) No. 1272/2009 (10).

Sprouted Grains Are Gaining Traction
Between 2006 and 2016, interest in products containing sprouted grains increased worldwide. Between 2006 and 2011, there was an average increase of 14% per year in the number of products launches containing sprouted grains. Between 2012 and 2016, the average yearly increase in product launches was 26% (Fig. 1). Based on a search of Mintel market data (www.mintel.com) using the terms “sprouted,” “sprout,” “germinated,” and “freshly sprouted,” including all categories, countries, positionings, flavors, and ingredients; excluding brussels sprout powder, brussels sprout juice, and brussels sprouts; and limited to products launched within the 2006–2016 timeframe, this trend in product launches was observed mainly in North America, followed by Europe and Australasia.

Fig. 1. Number of new product launches (2006–2016) containing sprouted grains based on a search of Mintel market data (www.mintel.com) using the terms “sprouted,” “sprout,” “germinated,” and “freshly sprouted,” including all food categories, countries, positionings, flavors, and ingredients and excluding brussels sprout powder, brussels sprout juice, and brussels sprouts.
Sprouted grains are gaining market share in a number of product categories. Mintel market data (www.mintel.com) was searched for new product launches containing sprouts globally per category using the terms “sprouted,” “sprout,” “germinated,” and “freshly sprouted,” including all categories, countries, positionings, flavors, and ingredients and excluding brussels sprout powder, brussels sprout juice, and brussels sprouts. From January 2015 to April 2017, the market category with the most product launches was snacks (22% of all products launched) followed by meals (19%) and bakery products (15%) (Fig. 2). The number of bakery products launched per bakery subcategory over the same period is summarized in Figure 3. Mintel market data (www.mintel.com) was searched using the same terms and timeframe. Bread and bread products topped the list of bakery subcategories, with 84 products launched. This suggests that bread products are good matrices for including sprouted grains and for advertising their inclusion.

The Reasons for the “Healthy Halo” Surrounding Sprouted Grains
Sprouted grains are very much in line with what today’s consumers are looking for, i.e., ingredients that are perceived as natural, nutritious, and healthy. This positive perception was demonstrated in a large-scale consumer study (N > 24,500) conducted by Canadean (now GlobalData), which asked consumers, “Do you think the following ingredients will have a positive or negative impact on your health?” More than two-thirds (70%) of the participants responded that sprouted grains have a positive impact on health, while only 4% responded that they have adverse effects; 18% of the responses were neutral, and 8% of participants indicated they were not familiar with sprouted grains (6).

The “healthy halo” that surrounds sprouted grains is a result of the many reports in the media attributing specific nutritional properties to sprouted grains and of the positive images associated with the concept of a grain giving life to a new plant. However, it is important to understand whether these reports are based on credible information. In the following section we discuss some of the perceived benefits of sprouted grains and attempt to highlight the truths and myths surrounding them.

Sprouted Grains as Whole Grains
Sprouted grains are considered whole grains. AACC International (1) approved the following statement in 2008:

Malted or sprouted grains containing all of the original bran, germ, and endosperm shall be considered whole grains as long as sprout growth does not exceed kernel length and nutrient values have not diminished. These grains should be labeled as malted or sprouted whole grain.

A second statement issued by the European Union on sprouted grains is related to fiber. According to EU Regulation (EC) No. 1924/2006 (11) it is possible to claim that sprouted grains are a “source of fibers” or are “rich in fibers” depending on their fiber content.

Nutrient Content of Sprouted Grains
It is generally believed that sprouted grains contain higher levels of vitamins and minerals than nonsprouted grains. However, when looking at the existing scientific evidence, the results are mixed (28), and the published studies are difficult to compare because the types and varieties of grains, soaking conditions (water quality), germination conditions (duration and temperature), and measurement methods differ from one study to another. Several studies (8,9,13,14,17,19–22,27,31,36–39) reported an increase in the levels of some vitamins and minerals with sprouting, while other studies reported no impact or even reduced levels of some vitamins and minerals (2,8,9,17,19,30,31,35). A summary of the results observed for two vitamins, B9 and E, across various studies is provided in Table I. Results have been recalculated based on dry matter content and compared with the reference intakes (RI) described in European Regulation (EU) No. 1169/2011 (12) to determine whether nutritional claims can be made. The results indicate that the addition of sprouted grains and pulses to a formulation has the potential to result in a final product with higher values for some vitamins.
and minerals. However, this depends on the type of grain and the sprouting process used and does not apply for all vitamins and minerals. Making claims such as “increased in [vitamin/mineral],” thus, remains possible but challenging and depends on the grain and the conditions used to sprout the grain. It is also important to remember that sprouted grains only represent part of the manufactured product (e.g., 15% of the wheat flour mass in bread), which makes use of the above claims even more challenging. Finally, if it is difficult to make the claim “increased in [vitamins/minerals],” other nutritional claims, such as “source of [vitamins/minerals]” or “rich in [vitamins/minerals],” shouldn’t be forgotten and may be a way to highlight a particular nutrient for which the requirements are easier to meet. For instance, a multigrain bread developed by Puratos that contains more than 10% sprouted grains (based on total dry ingredients) is allowed a “source of copper, zinc, magnesium and phosphorus” claim.

**Bioavailability of Micronutrients in Sprouted Grains**

Another property often mentioned is that micronutrients in sprouted grains are more bioavailable than in nonsprouted grains. Whole grains, seeds, and pulses contain significant amounts of phytates (25), which can form complexes with vitamins and minerals, making them unavailable for absorption by the body. Phytates show particularly strong affinities for minerals such as potassium, iron, magnesium, calcium, zinc, copper, and manganese (28). During sprouting, a portion of these naturally occurring complexes in grains, seeds, and pulses are degraded, which increases the bioavailability of the micronutrients. Degradation of phytates during sprouting/germination has been observed in many studies and in different grains, such as millet (17,26,27,34), sorghum (26,36), and rye and wheat (7,25). Germination time has been positively correlated with the extent of phytate degradation. A 20–30% reduction has been observed after 4 days of germination (2,3,5), but reductions as high as 80–85% can be reached after 10 days (4) (Fig. 4). Larsson et al. (24) found that the consumption of malted oat porridge, which contained 77% less phytate compared with its nonmalted counterpart, doubled the amount of zinc absorbed in healthy humans. In contrast, Tatala et al. (35) reported no significant effects of consumption of sprouted millet porridge on the iron status of Tanzanian children suffering from anemia compared with a similar group of children who received nonsprouted millet porridge. Existing data strongly suggest that the process of sprouting enhances the bioavailability of minerals due to degradation of phytate–mineral complexes by the action of phytase (4,5). However, more clinical trials are needed to confirm that this observation is directly linked to higher absorption of minerals in humans.

**Digestibility of Sprouted Grains**

Sprouted grains are also reportedly “easier to digest.” According to *The American Heritage Stedman’s Medical Dictionary* (2002 edition), digestion is

> The process by which food is converted into substances that can be absorbed and assimilated by the body, especially that accomplished in the alimentary canal by mechanical and enzymatic breakdown of foods into simpler chemical compounds.

Thus, it seems logical that foods in which the complex molecules have been entirely or partially broken down before being consumed would be easier to digest.

![Fig. 4. Phytate content in three types of grains as a function of germination time. Based on data from Azeke et al. (4).](image)

**Table I. Comparison of vitamin B₉ (folate) and E contents in grains before and after sprouting across several studies of various cereals and pulses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vitamin B₉ (RI = 0.2 mg)</th>
<th>Variety or Latin Name</th>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sprouting Duration</th>
<th>% of RI (per 100 g, dm)</th>
<th>% Increase/Decrease (absolute value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>Tommi</td>
<td>Koehler et al. (22)</td>
<td>102 hr</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>Olvin</td>
<td>Hefni and Witthöft (14)</td>
<td>96 hr</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rye</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Kariuoto et al. (20)</td>
<td>7 days</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rye</td>
<td>Amilo</td>
<td>Katina et al. (21)</td>
<td>6 days</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rye</td>
<td>Kaskellot</td>
<td>Hefni and Witthöft (14)</td>
<td>96 hr</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vitamin E (RI = 12 mg)</th>
<th>Variety or Latin Name</th>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sprouting Duration</th>
<th>% of RI (per 100 g, dm)</th>
<th>% Increase/Decrease (absolute value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Yang et al. (39)</td>
<td>8 days</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foxtail millet</td>
<td><em>Setaria italica</em> (L.) Beauv. or <em>Panicum italicum</em> L.</td>
<td>Coulbaly and Chen (9)</td>
<td>1–8 days</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soybean</td>
<td>Not mentioned</td>
<td>Chandrastri et al. (8)</td>
<td>5 days</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheat</td>
<td><em>Triticum aestivum</em> L.</td>
<td>Plaza et al. (31)</td>
<td>96 hr</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soybean</td>
<td><em>Glycine max</em> (L.) Merr.</td>
<td>Plaza et al. (31)</td>
<td>96 hr</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*RI: reference intake.*
During germination, numerous enzymes are released, resulting in the degradation of complex molecules such as proteins and carbohydrates into smaller molecules (28). Degradation of protein results in an increase in peptides and/or free amino acids. Hung et al. (18) reported a 260% increase in free amino acid levels in wheat grains after 2 days of germination. Afify et al. (3) observed a much smaller increase (11%) in sorghum after 3 days of germination. During sprouting, starch stored in the endosperm is hydrolyzed by amylases, yielding oligosaccharides and small sugars (28). Jood and Kapoor (19) observed a 30% reduction of starch and 400% increase of sugars (2.9 mg to 11 g per 100 g of flour in millet) after 1 day of germination, whereas Hung et al. (18) found the starch level decreased by 1% after 12 hr of germination. Thus, the extent of degradation varies depending on the grain and germination process.

Even though there is strong evidence that sprouting can improve the nutritional profile of grains, claims related to the bioavailability of vitamins and minerals and ease of digestion of sprouted products have not been approved by either the European Commission or the United States. This limits the opportunities for food manufacturers to communicate directly with consumers about the nutritional benefits of products containing sprouted grains. Highlighting the use of sprouted grains in a product through the product name or in a front-of-pack claim, such as “made with sprouted grains” or “contains X% of sprouted grains,” can help manufacturers take advantage of the “healthy halo” that surrounds sprouted grains.

Unique Flavor Profile of Sprouted Grains

The Puratos Taste Tomorrow study (www.tastetomorrow.com/research) revealed that consumers are attracted to food products and ingredients that are healthy, fresh, and tasty. Products made with sprouted grains appear to meet consumer demands for two of these qualities: taste and health benefits. As discussed in previous sections, sprouted grains can be linked to nutritional and health benefits. However, other characteristics, such as flavor, could be highlighted to promote products containing sprouted grains.

One of the beneficial characteristics of sprouted grains is their flavor profile. Due to the activation of endogenous amylolytic enzymes, complex starch molecules are transformed into simple oligosaccharides and sugars. This transformation adds natural sweetness to products when sprouted grains are used, which could help manufacturers reduce levels of added sugar in products. Also, protein polymers are transformed into peptides and amino acids. During food processing, simple sugar molecules, free amino acids, and peptides can act as flavor precursors of odor-active compounds (16). More than 30 volatile compounds have been identified in thermally treated rye malt extracts, including pyrazines, pyrazoles, pyranones, pyridines, pyrimidines, furans, furanones, phenols, esters, aldehydes, ketones, and alcohols (15,32). This distinguishes sprouted grain products from their nonsprouted counterparts, suggesting that the unique flavor of sprouted grains can be a further benefit for promoting products containing sprouted grains.

To test this theory, an in-house expert panel study was conducted by Puratos—an expert sensorial descriptive test of sprouted multigrain bread versus nonsprouted multigrain bread. The breads were presented to a panel of eight experts for individual profiling. The panelists were given a list of 17 aroma descriptors and asked to select the descriptors they could perceive in each bread. The final descriptors for each bread were the ones for which there was a consensus among the panelists: primary notes that were selected by at least six panelists; secondary notes that were selected by at least three panelists. The control bread (nonsprouted grains and pulses) was described as having a malted, yeasty, nutty aroma with herbal notes, whereas the bread made with sprouted grains and pulses was described as having naturally sweet, malted, fermented, fruity, and roasted notes (Table II). The hypothesis that the flavor of bread made with sprouted grains would be preferred over bread made without sprouted grains was tested in 2016 by Puratos using a consumer panel with 122 consumers who participated in a Sensibus (mobile sensory analysis lab) preference test of sprouted grain bread versus nonsprouted grain bread. The panelists received a 50% whole meal bread with 25% added grains that were either nonsprouted (control) or sprouted. The study found that 58% of respondents had a preference for one of the two breads, of which 75% preferred the sample prepared with sprouted grains.

Conclusions

Products made with sprouted grain are a growing segment in the food industry and trend projections suggest consumption will continue to increase. Still a niche market 15 years ago, products with sprouted grains are now represented in all categories, including snacks and bakery products. One reason for their increased use appears to be the consumer perception of sprouted grains as healthy, which is widely supported by messaging found across food blogs and health magazines. After reviewing the science behind sprouted grains, it appears that sprouted grains can offer superior nutrition compared with nonsprouted grains, depending on the specific grain and sprouting conditions. Currently European and American food manufacturers are not allowed to communicate some of the potential benefits of sprouted grains, such as bioavailability of micronutrients or digestibility. Sprouted grains do present other properties, however, that are as relevant to consumers as their nutritional benefits. By further processing sprouted grains, unique flavor profiles can be achieved. Selecting appropriate sprouted grains with desirable differentiated flavor profiles will provide food manufacturers with a message they can communicate to consumers while benefiting from the “healthy halo” that surrounds these grains.

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References


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