

Japan makes a superfruit out of the humble blackcurrant

Blackcurrants may be one of the most under-appreciated of berries. In the West, marketers have for decades focused only on this fruit's high vitamin C content. But blackcurrant drinks are by-and-large a mature, even stagnant area, and product innovation has been close to zero. It's only in Japan where blackcurrants' superfruit potential is being realised. By MEI-LIN HANSEN.

Called kurorasuguri in Japan, blackcurrants are marketed there under their French nomenclature, cassis, and it is by this name and its Japanese transliteration *kashisu*, that they are commonly recognised. Since 2005, *kashisu*, cassis or blackcurrants – call them what you will – have been getting Japanese ophthalmologists, dermatologists, university professors and, unsurprisingly, those involved in the nutrition business more than a little bit excited.

It's cassis' ability to maintain and improve eye health which is creating much of the fuss: according to surveys conducted by the Japan Institute for Labour, Policy and Training, nearly 80% of Japan's workers experience some form of eyestrain from using PCs or mobile devices. A further 90% of

workers complain specifically about "tired eyes" or "painful eyes".

Consequently, the market for eye-health supplements and foods in Japan is large – worth approximately ¥99.5 billion (\$822 million/€609 million) at retail prices. Some 90% of the eye-health market is governed by lutein-and bilberry-based foods, beverages and supplements, accounting for ¥91 billion (\$753 million/€558 million) in retail sales (with bilberry holding the lion's share).

But when bilberry prices started escalating in 2006 (due to poor crops), supplement and food companies began to inquire more intently about cassis as an ingredient for eye health. In that year, retail sales of functional foods, beverages and supplements containing cassis reached a sturdy ¥3.5 billion (\$29

million/€21 million) – 40% growth over 2005. The value of the cassis market is now about one tenth of the bilberry market – but given that the bilberry market took 10 years to reach more than ¥40 billion (\$331 million/€245 million) in sales, cassis's performance so far is fairly impressive.

Interest by Japanese manufacturers in cassis was in part spurred by extremely high bilberry prices, but two other factors have really set the cassis market rolling. One is the establishment of the Japan Cassis Association – an organisation which educates Japanese consumers about the potency of cassis as a fruit that is good for the eyes – and the other is the entry of major food company Meiji Seika into the cassis market.

The Japan Cassis Association was founded in 2005 to coincide with Japan's "eye protection day". Through the Association cassis producers, researchers, importers and manufacturers promote the benefits of cassis as an ingredient in supplements and foods targeted at eye health. With missions such as "enlightening people about prevention of eye disease through consumption of cassis" and "establishing a cassis industry and culture", the Association via its website www.j-cassis.jp explains the history of the fruit, describes its properties and origins, and reports on blackcurrant research. Japanese consumers also learn about uses for the fruit and, in particular, its potential benefits for prevention of focus disorder, eye-strain and improvement of blood circulation. Most significantly, the Association was responsible for the very rapid rise in the popularity of cassis as a functional ingredient.

Curiously, although the French name



The Japan Cassis Association was established to educate uninformed Japanese consumers about the health benefits, nutrition properties and great taste of blackcurrants.