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INTERVIEW: Avebe's Solanic Innovates with Unique Food Ingredients, Potato Proteins

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23 April 2007 – Dutch Avebe, a leading starch company active in the food, feed, paper, building, textiles and adhesives industries, went through a reorganisation and cost-reduction programme last year. The firm has recently made the news with the creation of an innovative and promisingly lucrative subsidiary named Solanic.

After divesting its non-core activities outside of Europe, such as the sale of its tapioca starch operations in Thailand and the sale of production companies in Brazil and China, Avebe ended the 2005/2006 financial year on a good note.

Avebe's chairman, Okke Koo, attributed the improved results to the successful implementation of the company's

"Reconstruction Phase", which he says was founded on three pillars: "focusing on the core business, potato starch in Europe; cost-price leadership and growth through innovation".

Solanic, launched in February, is seen as an embodiment of Avebe's growth strategy based on innovation.

The new subsidiary, which, according to Avebe, will be a new profit generator, has a very promising breakthrough innovation in the pipeline.

FLEXNEWS spoke to Solanic's representative director, Frank Goovaerts, to find out more.

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Goovaerts simply started by saying that the potato contains a lot of water, 18% starch, and a lot of nutritional extras, such as protein which represents 1 to 1.5% of the potato.

“Solanic is about non-starch-based ingredients”, says Goovaerts, who goes on to say that by extracting non-starch content, his company will “enter into new applications, new markets, and, of course, create value for both Avebe and for the customers”.

Solanic's goal is to create new value from the potato, starting with protein.

'Solanic is about non-starch-based ingredients'

Frank Goovaerts
Representative Director, Solanic

A Unique Project

Potato protein is already extracted for use in animal feeds. However, Solanic claims to be the first company able to extract proteins at the mass production quality levels required for human consumption. The extraction process itself until now had only taken place in laboratories at a small scale.

Dr Laurice Pouvreau at the University of Wageningen explains in a study why potato protein use was limited to animal nutrition: “Potato proteins ... are recovered by an acidic heat-treatment of the potato juice. This results in a completely irreversible precipitation of the proteins, with a complete loss of functionality for food applications. This explains why so far potato proteins are only used in low-value applications such as feed”*.

Goovaerts says that Avebe has access to a large potato crop for its starch production, allowing Solanic to benefit from a substantial raw material supply and Avebe R&D resources, headquartered in Veendam.



Avebe's facility in Veendam

In partnership with Upfront Chromatography A/S, a Danish company working on separation technology, Solanic is currently building a factory in Gastelternijveen, near Groningen, in the Netherlands, in which it will use its breakthrough absorbents to extract high-performance proteins.

Avebe is “investing millions” in the project over the next 5 years, Goovaerts told FLEXNEWS.

The new facility will start operations at a capacity of about 1,000 tons per year with a view to upscale quickly if needed.

A Niche Market

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Solanic's project can be seen as a logical adjustment to the shift in consumption trends. Recent food safety issues and health scares such as BSE, avian influenza, increased media coverage of salmonella contaminations, GMO matters, as well as allergenicity, have all had an effect on meat consumption and created a growing need for alternative protein sources. As a result, the vegetable protein market has grown significantly. Estimates of the global market for protein ingredients now exceed 1.5 billion tons, Goovaerts told FLEXNEWS.

'The advantages of Solanic potato proteins are their clean flavour, variety of functionality - all while being of vegetable origin, with similar properties to animal proteins'

Frank Goovaerts

Despite the fact that the animal protein market remains huge, and that other major vegetable proteins such as soya are increasingly expanding, Solanic says it has found a niche market in potato protein, which differentiates itself from the main sources of protein as it provides added value as illustrated below.

Goovaerts goes on to say that Solanic potato protein is "a vegetable-based protein with the functionality of an animal protein". "The advantages of Solanic potato proteins are their clean flavour, variety of functionality – all while being of vegetable origin, with similar properties to animal proteins".

With this view, Solanic doesn't see any competition arising from other vegetable or even animal protein markets. The company is not seeking to replace soya or gluten, as these exist in large volumes and remain non-added-value vegetable proteins.

Solanic, a pioneer in potato protein extraction for human consumption, says it is not aware of competition from other producers of starch. Goovaerts expects this will only be a matter of time. "Down the road, if we are successful, as we fully expect to be, I am sure people will enter", he says.

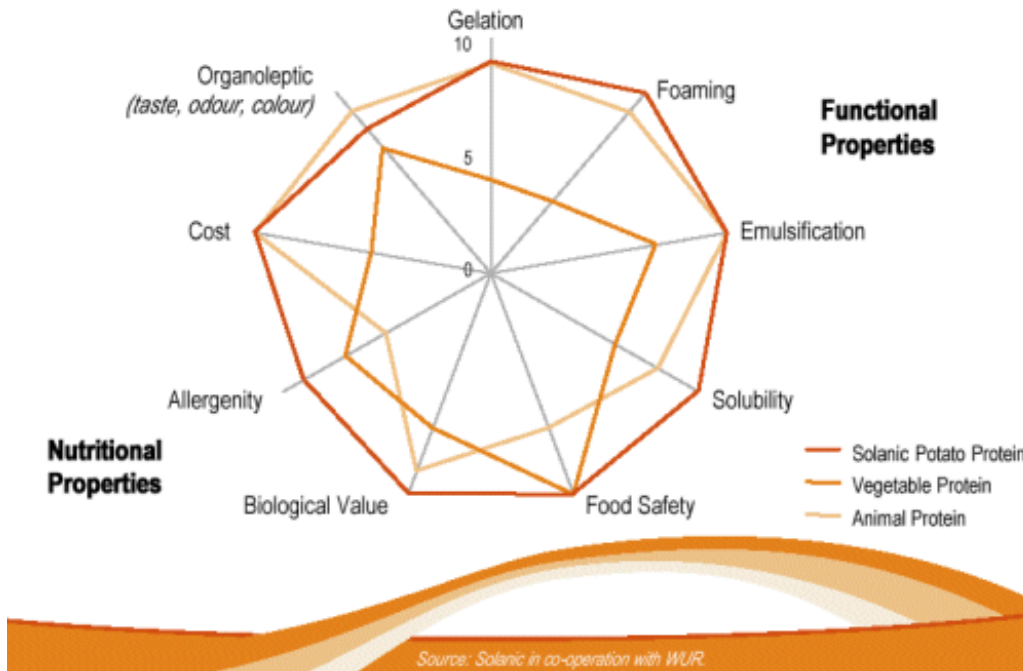
High-Performance Proteins

Although Solanic is still in the phase of product development, the company has established numerous contacts within the food and pharmaceutical industries. This is due to some very encouraging test results on the functional and nutritional properties of its potato protein.

Studies conducted in collaboration with the University of Wageningen and Dutch food research institute NIZO have concluded that, in comparison with vegetable and animal protein, Solanic potato proteins are, in general, obtaining better results in processes such as gelation, emulsification, foaming and solubility. The graph below highlights these results.

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Unique Features Solanic Potato Proteins



- A Confectionery Product Containing Water, Crystallizing...

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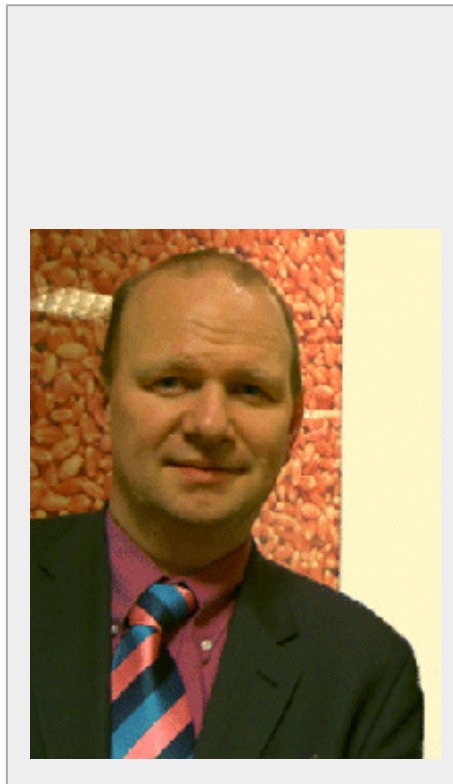
Solanic's potato protein has sparked interest from a wide range of sectors in the food industry. Some players in the dairy, bakery, meat, beverage and convenience foods industries have already signed up as customers, says Solanic's representative director. So far, Solanic's clients are mostly based in Europe, but enthusiasm is also coming from Asia and North America.

The potato protein, which is available in powder form (protein content >90 - 95%) and liquid form (protein content >15 - 20%), can be used in the pharmaceutical industry as an anti-inflammatory agent. It can be used in creams and wipes to prevent soars and other skin irritations in adults and young children.

In the food industry, it has many applications. Its foam, gelation and emulsion properties allows the potato protein to be a useful ingredient in products such as ice cream, mousses, whipping cream, crème fraiche, bavaois, and cappuccinos. Other products include yoghurt, sour cream, custard, low-fat spreads, quiche fillings, mayonnaise, salad dressings, and even biscuits.

Two other markets in which Solanic will also be investing are protein fortification and the area of food-allergenicity.

Firstly, the company believes it will have a role to play in the domain of protein nutrition and its products such as energy drinks, enhanced-value yoghurt drinks and even weight management products. In the latter case, Solanic will provide fractions of protease inhibitors, extracted from a small fraction of the potato, to be used as a satiety enhancing ingredient.



Secondly, Solanic will be selling 'non-allergen' products. Allergy has become an increasing concern for consumers, who are looking more and more for 'non-allergen' labels. Studies have shown that, in comparison with peanuts, eggs, milk, soya and other protein based ingredients, potato leads to very little and/or no allergenic reactions.

Frank Goovaerts
Representative Director, Solanic

London Kick-Off

In any case, Solanic has set itself an autumn deadline to start commercial production.

From 30 October 2007 to 1 November 2007, 'Food Ingredients Europe 2007' will take place in London. Solanic will be there to announce the commercial launch of its products. Until then, the company will be feathering its nest and hiring more staff to meet the production needs in its Gastelternijveen factory. Goovaerts expects an extra 50 employees in the next 4 to 5 years.

* Occurrence and physico-chemical properties of protease inhibitors from potato tuber (*Solanum tuberosum*). L.A.M. Pouvreau - 14 June 2004 - <http://library.wur.nl/wda/abstracts/ab3602.html>

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