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Eating seaweed is a little alien to most people; and a large number of those who have experienced it have not yet graduated further than the nori sheets used to wrap sushi. Yet seaweed or marine algae – to give them their correct name – are bang on trend.

There have been more than 29,000 micro algae and seaweed-based products launched into the consumer marketplace since 2010, half of which were launched in the past year. And it's not just the specialist retailers that are cashing in; the major grocery chains are now stocking seaweed lines too. In the United Kingdom, for example, Marks & Spencer (M&S) rolled out seaweed-based products from three different brands nationwide in April. A month later, Tesco also launched a new range. Even celebrity chef Jamie Oliver has been publicly praising seaweed as a food – further stoking consumer interest.

While it is becoming more and more mainstream as a gourmet product, seaweed's rise owes an awful lot to its

nutritional properties and its ability to address a raft of specific health concerns. It has been described as the most nutritious form of vegetation on the planet, and while it's probably not possible to qualify such an endorsement, there's no getting away from the fact that it scores high in terms of vitamins, minerals and trace elements. It's also rich in antioxidants and can be used for salt replacement. The list of benefits is extensive.

All species are broadly classified as reds, greens or browns and they range from mild to very spicy, and from nutty to a chicken flavor. Their carbohydrate and protein components also vary dramatically: their protein can range from a cereal and vegetable level to a soy bean and animal level.

Speaking at the Food Matters Live education program and exhibition in London last week, Dr. Craig Rose of U.K.-based supplier Seaweed & Co. confirmed seaweed production is a very diverse area, with the planet producing some 10,000 different varieties, including more than 650 species around the U.K. coastline alone.

The majority of the seaweed utilized in the West is wild harvested, with activities ranging from small artisanal to huge commercial operations, explained Rose. But while there's plenty of scope for growth in wild fisheries, he feels there needs to be a better understanding of sustainability issues. In addition to being environmentally aware and ensuring minimal impacts on marine ecosystems, other important considerations include the time of year, the harvesting method and the species being targeted. It's also important that the fishery is accredited or regulated, he said.

“If you're a seaweed product manufacturer then these are the sorts of questions that hopefully you are asking your supplier.”

It's also essential suppliers have a fully traceable supply chain, “because a lot of questions get asked about seaweed as it is a quite new industry,” he said.

Already, the sector is seeing the demand for certain seaweeds exceeding the supply, which Rose said, “is an issue for any future food.” This pressure is being intensified by significantly increased interest from the cosmetics, medical and energy sectors.

According to the latest statistics from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), of the 24.9 million metric tons (MT) wet weight of seaweed harvested in 2012, some 23.8 million MT came from aquaculture with a handful of Asian countries – led by China and Indonesia – dominating production. The remaining 1.1 million MT came from wild harvests.

“The future is very much in aquaculture and cultivated seaweeds, and in this respect China and Southeast Asia are millennia ahead of us. It's on a massive scale there, with millions of tons of annual production,” said Rose.

“Cultivated seaweed has to be the future. It's not viable to build significant volume based on wild harvests.

“In aquaculture, the human consumption of farmed fish has overtaken its consumption of the wild catch because wild fish cannot fulfill the global demand. Seaweed reflects those same trends, and as the sector grows, more and more will have to be cultivated.”

And while at-sea cultivation has its place, particularly for the commoditized market, many seaweed producers are moving to land-based operations that use tanks and recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS), said Rose. There's also growing interest in incorporating seaweed in Integrated Multi-Trophic Aquaculture (IMTA) programs with farmed fish species.

“Seaweed is a growth industry which will continue to expand rapidly, but cultivation is the future,” said Rose. “It can feed the world as a sustainable food source.”