

# Natural hydrocolloids: Nexira enters alt-dairy space with Unipektin acquisition

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02 Nov 2021 --- Nexira, a global player in acacia fiber and natural plant-based ingredients for the food, nutrition and health industries, has acquired Switzerland-based Unipektin Ingredients, a company specializing in natural hydrocolloids, such as locust bean gum (LBG).

The move propels Nexira into the dairy and plant-based alternatives scene as part of its diversification strategy. The terms of the transaction have not been disclosed.



Speaking exclusively to **FoodIngredientsFirst**, Mathieu Dondain, the company’s general manager and Olivier Houalla, Nexira’s managing director, share how the latest move is in line with the company’s growth strategy to enter new markets with natural ingredients.

“In the past few years, we have been expanding into botanical extracts and ingredients for nutraceuticals and nutrition,” notes Dondain, highlighting the company’s goal to expand its product portfolio beyond the core acacia gum market.

“We will now be able to diversify even further with the ingredients that Unipektin provides to reach markets that we don’t reach today,” he affirms.

## Entering new markets

Unipektin Ingredients produces natural ingredients for the food industry, such as specific grades of tara gum, hydrolyzed guar gum and beet fiber. Importantly, the company is a key player in the production of LBG, used for its thickening and stabilizing properties.

Nexira guarantees a reliable supply chain and continued access to raw materials with full traceability. With the addition of Unipektin’s range of functional ingredients to its portfolio, Nexira consolidates its position in the fast-growing market segments of dairy and dairy alternatives.

LBG is currently a staple hydrocolloid in dairy with emerging applications in plant-based, notes Dondain.

“The most interesting applications for development currently include ice cream and cream cheese, but also in milk substitutes. We see dairy alternatives popping up everywhere, especially in the US but also more so in Europe. Dairy and dairy alternatives are currently the main market of Unipektin.”

## **Getting in on LBG**

LBG doesn't only bring texture and viscosity, according to Houalla. "It is a beautiful hydrocolloid that brings a unique mouthfeel."

This is in contrast to hydrocolloids that bring viscosity alone, such as xanthan gum or guar gum.

Dondain adds that the ingredient also has important functional properties, such as maintaining the consistency of a finished milk substitute or preventing ice cream from crystallizing.

Bringing the strengths of both companies together, Dondain details Nexira is looking to launch a new product range at Fi Europe later this year with better specification and properties than traditional LBG.

"This range will offer better and faster solubility than traditional LBG," explains Dondain.

Houalla adds that both acacia gum and LBG are natural plant-based products. "For these two ingredients, there is enormous demand."

Carob, which is used to produce LBG, is sourced from Mediterranean countries.

### **"A good fit"**

Houalla envisions a combination of opportunities ahead for the ingredient.

"LBG has always been a product of interest for Nexira because it's a natural hydrocolloid texturizer. It's part of Nexira's market. At the same time, Unipektin is a Swiss company and the Swiss have gained a reputation for having high-quality products, like Unipektin," he explains.

"Moreover, the sourcing of LBG is across Mediterranean countries, which we are close to, so that was a good match for Nexira," notes Houalla.

Nexira will build upon Unipektin's established network of trusted partners as well as its own expertise.

"The raw material sourcing expertise we have in other countries brings us to a level of confidence in how to operate this company," adds Dondain.

## **Keeping supply in stock**

Houalla stresses the vital importance of supplier relationships as supply chains are currently being challenged across industries.

"Unipektin has a network of trusted suppliers, but we want to expand this network and work with partners. That's what we have done with our botanicals division. We have strong partnerships in Tunisia and we want to build this in the LBG-producing countries."

Unipektin Ingredients produces natural ingredients for the food industry, such as specific grades of tara gum, hydrolyzed guar gum and beet fiber. Houalla also highlights that Nexira continually seeks new sources from different countries to ensure supply.

“Our goal is to increase the number of suppliers and producing countries. We’ve been doing this for gum acacia for decades.”

He explains that in the beginning, Nexira sourced acacia gum from just one or two countries and has over the years expanded to sourcing from 15 countries worldwide.

He adds that despite current anxiety over poor LBG harvests, harvests have been normal, and there is sufficient supply. The high prices are not due to shortages, but massive demand, he states.

### **Expanding ingredients scope**

With a record turnover of more than €130 million (US\$150 million) in 2021, and 90% of that total coming from exports, Nexira is a key producer of functional, organic, clean label ingredients sourced responsibly and sustainably.

“In the coming years and for 2025, we want to be above €200 million (US\$231 million) and even higher, but we have to be reasonable to stay an independent family-owned company,” affirms Dondain.

Future growth will likely come in the nutraceutical and nutritional sectors. Nexira will also investigate LBG for its nutritional applications. The carob crop was recently touted as “super-nutritious” by agri-tech start-up CarobWay.

“For the coming years, we will look more into botanical extracts and premium ingredients for our health division,” explains Dondain.

“In December, we will celebrate the 40-year anniversary of our first office in the US, and we aim to acquire at least one US company in the nutraceutical or nutrition market by then.”

***By Elizabeth Green and Missy Green***

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Nexira

Founded in 1895, Nexira has been a key innovator in the food, health and nutrition industries. Nexira is dedicated to providing only the best natural and organic plant-based ingredients. Our head office is based in France, with an international presence in more than 80 countries on 5 continents.

Our family-owned company has built its reputation as the **world leader in acacia gum**. Our expertise has expanded to encompass a large range of ingredients derived from **natural sources**.

Nexira offers a large range of ingredients for the Food and beverages, Nutrition, wellbeing, and Health industries.

Our portfolio of products includes high-quality **plant extract** powders, **antioxidants**, soluble **dietary fibers**, and **active botanical extracts**. Our large range of products includes highly functional and nutritional ingredients, antioxidants and active botanicals for weight management, stress management, sports nutrition, immunity, digestive health, cognitive and cardiovascular health.

Our natural premium ingredients are supported by scientific and clinical studies. At Nexira, innovation is at the core of our customer service. We work to identify and value the natural properties of our ingredients and scientifically confirm their nutritional and health benefits.

Since the early 1970s, Nexira has been deeply involved in sustainable development at several levels.

In 2021 the inavea range achieves carbon neutrality: Nexira is now able to provide carbon-neutral ingredients counting as zero in your carbon footprint and in the carbon-score of your finished products.