

Brown rice protein could be the whey killer

Q&A with David Janow, Axiom Foods

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David Janow is founder and CEO of brown rice ingredient supplier **Axiom Foods**. Janow got a leg up in the sports nutrition market after a **University of Tampa** study confirmed that Axiom's Oryzatein brand rice protein isolate, when ingested by athletes after resistance training, offered the same muscle-building results as whey protein. Long considered the gold standard of proteins, whey now faces stiff competition from a plant-based option that matches it on performance and beats it on price, digestibility and sustainability. Janow spoke to **NBJ** from his offices in Los Angeles.

nbj: Describe this new study for us.

David Janow: It was double-blind and crossover, so no one knew what they were taking. There were 24 trained athletes, so they weren't just out-of-the-box people. I think the next studies that they do will involve women and African-Americans and the regular guy who wants to come off the street and start taking this product.

nbj: Had we not mapped the amino acid profile of rice protein before?

DJ: I had in the past. What happened was nobody believed me. I told them I'd sent it to independent labs—they didn't really care. **Increnovo**, a scientific consultancy, got hold of this information and wanted to take it further. They went ahead and did this themselves, with the help of the University of Tampa. And lo and behold, we have the proof which validates what we've been doing for the last three or four years.

nbj: But independent of the results, your product must be doing pretty well already.

DJ: Yes. We're in some of the top brands out there. **Garden of Life** has us, **NOW Foods** has us, **Jarrow** has us. All the rice proteins on the market—we're probably in them. And there are quite a few. Our business has grown substantially. We grew about 140% last year and we've been doing triple-digit growth for the last two or three years.

nbj: Was organic a selling point from the beginning? Is that what you set out to do?

DJ: No, originally it was conventional. It took me three years to develop the land to get it to organic standards. Probably a little over half of our business is organic, but it used to be all conventional.

nbj: Has organic become a cost of doing business as you target this new set of sports consumers?

DJ: Yes. A lot of people want that organic product. And I guess since organic whey is so high in price, it just hasn't taken off yet.

nbj: Can rice protein undercut whey on price?

DJ: 100%. Absolutely.

nbj: Playing in sports nutrition, it doesn't seem like organic is something you would immediately jump to.

DJ: No, and what we'll probably do is conventional. My other company **Growing Naturals'** line of rice protein products happens to be organic. One thing that I want to do now that the equivalency between rice and whey has been shown is a new line called GN Sport, which will probably be conventional but will be geared more toward that sports athlete. There are two separate products that will probably be derived from this—one for bodybuilding and one for the endurance, triathlete audience or for someone like me who's 43 and trying to get into shape again after taking 20 years off. My fiancé and I are doing the **Tough Mudder** run in June, so we're trying to get a team together—but this is stuff I never would have done 10 years ago. I think that's the person we're trying to attract.

nbj: Besides price, what are the other selling points of rice protein versus whey?

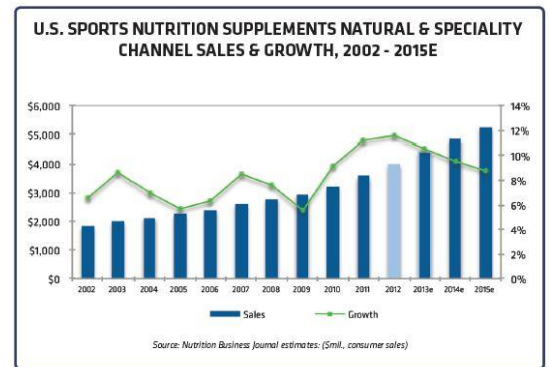
DJ: Well, it's gluten-free. It's vegan, so you cover that market. It's lactose-free. Hypoallergenic, of course. And it's easy on the stomach. One thing bodybuilders have realized is that whey gives you gas—Oryzatein doesn't.

nbj: But the muscle-building mechanics are basically the same?

DJ: Identical. Which is crazy. I didn't expect that at all. I expected the results to be good, but I was blown away that rice was identical to whey.

nbj: Do you think you can penetrate this core market of bodybuilders, or will you target specific niches?

DJ: I think it can be used across the board. The general bodybuilder wants to get big, but price is an issue. A comparable bottle of whey protein on the store shelf costs 1.5x to 2x more than my rice protein. And if the rice is good quality and I can show that it's proven to increase muscle mass, I think that's huge. With some good PR and marketing, the vegan protein market has some legs. Rice protein in particular has the most legs because of this study. There haven't been any other studies—folks are just mixing stuff and saying, 'Hey, it's good for you.' Hemp has an incomplete amino acid profile. Pea is incomplete. If you can extract the protein, which is what Axiom does, you can get a pretty good protein source. If you just mix in amaranth or quinoa by itself, it's just like eating the whole food. I don't think it should be used for bodybuilding purposes.



nbj: Where do you fit into the overall rice protein isolate market?

DJ: We're the only ones in the world that do it. We do probably 95% of the market, if not more. We're the only ones who can say it's brown rice protein. It's not patented, but the way we do it is a trade secret. What makes our product unique is we take all three portions of the rice—the endosperm, the germ and the bran. It's nearly impossible for someone else to do it, economically. The other way some people do it is from the rice bran only, which is something we have the technology to do also, but the problem is that the protein level is not very high.

nbj: There's probably a stigma among bodybuilders about not being able to bulk up on plants.

DJ: I think there is, but that's my job to change it. That's the biggest thing I'm going to do this year. Look, there are some people who have certainly embraced the vegan proteins. **Twinlab** has a product coming out in May. **Gaspari** has a brown rice protein, and they've done a good job of pushing it. The clinical trials haven't been ready for them, but if they look at

this clinical trial, they have some armor to go to these bodybuilders and convince them of what it does.

The line we have right now is for everyday use. You can use it as a bodybuilding tool, but I didn't think they'd be using our product. We just have chocolate and vanilla. If I'm going to do GN Sport, I'll toss some branched-chains and other goodies in there—same way you'd get nano-filtered whey with BCAAs. That way you have a super bodybuilding food. Some of these plant-based branched-chains come from rice, some come from astragalus, some come from chicory.

nbj: Do you expect triple-digit growth again this year?

DJ: Yes. We did \$22 million or \$23 million this year. And next year we're set to do about \$60 million, which would be around 200%. **General Mills, Kellogg** and all those people are becoming more receptive to rice protein too, so I think we're going to see a lot of growth in the food industry.

nbj: Is food a large portion of your business?

DJ: No, but that's the Holy Grail. For a nutrition product, this is great. It really works. For a food product, they need to find an application. That's what our Midwest operation has done—we've hired a whole R&D team to work on applications for rice protein. We're working with some of the best food scientists in the world—meaning General Mills and Kellogg—to develop the functionality out even more. Whether it's extrusion, meat applications, flavor enhancers, umami flavors—a lot of the growth will be from there.

nbj: Taste?

DJ: Neutral. Even easier to work with on taste than whey.