



Yogurt products on the assembly line at the Stonyfield Farm plant in Londonderry, New Hampshire. The new production line at Stonyfield's Londonderry plant churns out 800,000 plastic yogurts a week, and the company, a subsidiary of French dairy giant Lactalis, plans to build a second line this year. — AFP photos

Yogurt maker Lactalis betting on US appetite

French dairy giant Lactalis is betting big on North America, adapting to local preferences to attract consumers while it manages country-specific issues, such as the extreme volatility of US milk prices. On the new production line at Stonyfield Farm in Londonderry, New Hampshire, a Lactalis subsidiary since 2017, 800,000 yogurts are pumped out every week. The organic brand is seeing strong demand for its products aimed at babies and children, so Stonyfield plans to build a second production line for them this year.

To nibble at US market share in the yogurt sector, where Lactalis is behind Danone, Chobani and Yoplait, the company has also adopted targeted strategies. Unlike Europeans, who often eat yogurt at the end of a meal, Americans "have yogurt for breakfast or as a snack," said Esteve Torrens, Stonyfield's CEO. "So the yogurts must be more nutritious, and in larger portions," he adds, noting that individual cups in the US market generally weigh 170 grams, compared to just 125 grams in France.

The company also is monitoring changes in taste, like the thick, high-protein and low-sugar Icelandic yogurts from the Siggi's brand, acquired by Lactalis in 2018. "When I came to the United States as a student, a lot of foods were full of sugar,"



founder Siggi Hilmarsson recalls, noting that the best-selling yogurt at the time contained proportionally more sugar than a soda. He introduced Icelandic skyr to the American market in 2006, but sales really took off in 2012 and 2013 when "sugar replaced fat as public enemy number one in healthy eating," he said.

Driver shortage

He decided to sell his business four

years ago to Lactalis in order to promote his yogurt in other countries. The brand is now available in France, Australia, Canada and South Korea. With Siggi's and Stonyfield, as well the natural, specialty and organic cheeses acquired from Kraft in 2021, and the labne and other dairy products from Karoun integrated into its portfolio in 2017, the United States will become Lactalis' largest market this year after France. It is just ahead of Canada

where the group, with an annual turnover of 22 billion euros, has grown in recent years, especially after buying Ultima Foods.

The firm relies on its experience in the sector and its global reach to relaunch products whose financial performance no longer satisfied their former owners, and to expand some promising brands. Most of the new machines installed at the Stonyfield production site come from

Europe "because we have historical relations with our suppliers and they know what we need," production manager Mathieu Le Duey told reporters during a tour of the plant.

A private company founded in Laval, France in 1933 and still controlled by the Besnier family, Lactalis first entered the North American market when it opened an import-export office in the early 1980s to introduce French products. The group has expanded through various acquisitions and now has 30 sites and 7,400 employees in Canada and the United States.

More recently it has had to grapple with issues particular to the American market, including labor shortages and volatile dairy prices, which are based on trading on the Chicago exchange. "For two years, it's been hellish. We can't find carriers because they have trouble finding drivers," said Gilles Meziere, the group's North America chief executive. "We have very high turnover rates in our factories," sometimes forcing the temporary suspension of production lines, he adds. At the Stonyfield factory, the group "had to bring in executives for a day because we couldn't put the products in the boxes." — AFP

Fathers relive nightmare on Gaza's Wehda Street

On a fateful night in May 2021, three Palestinian fathers living on Gaza City's Wehda Street shared a common tragedy in air strike. Flashbacks haunt surviving family members to this day. "I was there under the rubble, I could hear my daughter Dana's voice screaming: 'Daddy! Daddy!'. I shouted back but she didn't answer anymore," sighs Riad Eshkountana in front of the wasteland where the family apartment, part of a

three-storey block, used to stand. On May 16, the building collapsed in Zionist attacks targeting the Gaza "metro", a network of tunnels built by the Islamist movement Hamas which rules the impoverished coastal territory of 2.3 million residents.

Eshkountana was in the living room when his building was hit. "I rushed to the boys' room. I saw my wife trying to pick them up, but the ceiling suddenly collapsed on top of them and the floor gave way under my feet," he said. "Under the rubble, I heard my two-and-a-half-year-old son Zayn crying out until his voice died out. When I was pulled out of the rubble, I was told Dana and Zayn were now martyrs, like my wife Abeer," said Eshkountana, 43, choking back sobs.

'Life changed forever'

He lost four of his five children as well as his wife that night. "At that moment, my life changed forever... If 100 years passed, I would still remember them," said the father who emerged alive from the rubble along with seven-year-old daughter Suzy. Initially, they moved into an apartment near



Palestinian Alaa Abu Al-Ouf, 47, sits at his rented grocery store on Wehda street in Gaza City.

Wehda Street, before settling in another one not far off, together with his mother, Suzy and a new wife. "Almost every day I go back to the destroyed house, I remember my life with the children, moments with the family," said Eshkountana, who also lost his possessions in the rubble, including family photos.

'Impossible to forget'

After last year's 11-day war between Hamas and Zionists that left 260 dead in the Gaza Strip and 14 in the Jewish state, Gaza's few psychotherapists converged on Wehda Street to help survivors of the grieving Eshkountana, Abu al-Ouf and Kolak families. "I thought we were safe on Wehda Street," a busy area with its clothing stores, cafes and a bakery, says Shukri al-Kolak, 50, who lost 22 family members, including his wife, three of his children and his parents.

The Kolaks' apartment, located in a building just 50 meters from the Eshkountanas' home, also collapsed in a crater left by the air strike that left a total of some 40 dead. The father survived along with daughter Zaynab and son Osama. "I remember the dead every moment. I try to forget, but it's impossible," says Kolak, a

tall man with curly hair, who says he has not bought any Zionist products since the war and will never remarry. "I would be wrong for any woman. No woman could live with my suffering," he said.

'Nightmares during the day'

Alaa Abu al-Ouf, 49, says he stopped psychological counseling for his surviving children "because it reminded them too much of what happened". He lost 14 family members in the strikes on Wehda Street, including his wife Diana, who died of her injuries, and daughters Shaima and Rawan.

After the war, Abu al-Ouf moved to an apartment 200 metres from his former address where he now lives with his second wife, their baby daughter, and his two older children. Every day, he returns to a mini-mart near the old home, wondering if one day his apartment and life will ever be rebuilt. "I don't have nightmares at night, I have them during the day, every time I pass here, where my house used to be. Everything here reminds me of the family I lost." — AFP



Palestinian Alaa Abu Al-Ouf, 47, looks at pictures of his wife and two daughters who died in a Zionist airstrike, during an interview at a rented apartment on Wehda street in Gaza City.



An aerial picture shows a view of Wehda Street in Gaza City.



A Palestinian man walks past the site where the Abu al-Ouf building stood on Wehda street. On a fateful night in May 2021, three Palestinian families living on Gaza City's Wehda Street shared a common tragedy in Zionist air strike. — AFP photos

Nepali climbers begin this year's Everest summits

Eleven Nepali climbers reached the top of Mount Everest on Saturday, the first of hundreds of climbers expected to summit the world's highest mountain from its southern approach in the coming weeks. Among them was Kami Rita Sherpa, who extended his own record as the person with the most Everest summits.

The team reached the peak as part of an expedition to fix ropes leading up the ascent, setting the route for foreign climbers. "We have received information that the rope-fixing team of eleven climbers has reached the peak at around 6:55 pm Nepal time," tourism department official Bhisma Raj Bhattarai told AFP. Nepal has issued 316 permits to mountaineers for this year's spring climbing season, which runs from mid-April to the end of May.

Most Everest hopefuls are each escorted by a Nepali guide, meaning more than 600 climbers will tread the same path to the top of the 8,849-metre (29,032-foot) peak in the coming weeks. "Now the road has opened for other climbers to summit Everest, we will see teams move up in the coming days," said Mingma Sherpa of Seven Summit Treks, which led the rope-fixing team. Mingma Sherpa added that Kami Rita Sherpa "has reached the summit for the 26th time, making a new record". His record-setting 25th ascent was also made as he led rope-fixers up Everest last year.

"Some people chase records, but I have not been doing this for records," Kami Rita Sherpa said in an interview with AFP in March, before heading off to Everest. "I think about how we can increase tourism in Nepal, what can we do for more mountain climbers to come here and how can we satisfy them and make them happy." The 52-year-old followed in his father's footsteps and became a mountain guide, first summiting the peak in 1994. He has climbed Everest almost every year since.

A Chinese expedition reached the top of Everest on Wednesday from its north side in Tibet, according to Chinese state broadcaster CGTN. Although China continues to ban foreign climbers because of the coronavirus pandemic, Nepal reopened its peaks to mountaineers last year. With COVID-19 cases receding, expedition operators in Nepal are hopeful for a busier climbing season this year. There has already been one fatality this season - a Nepali climber carrying equipment uphill was found dead last month. — AFP