GAME CHANGERS FOR 60 YEARS

60 years of entrepreneurial adventure

EPISODE 4: From the clinic to the industry, a pioneer on all fronts

A human, scientific and industrial adventure, the history of bioMérieux has been an incredible family and entrepreneurial story since its creation in 1963.
Embark on a 5-episode journey to discover our 6 decades of commitment to improving health worldwide.

Back to the 90s.

The food industry has experienced incredible growth over the past decades, with that growth comes an increased need for consumer protection. In 1992, while the United Kingdom and France were in the midst of the mad cow crisis, two major outbreaks of listeriosis and salmonellosis shook the European food processing industry, which did not have the means to deal with it at the time. That was the year in which the bioMérieux industrial microbiology unit was established. The challenge was huge. Pressure from consumers and public authorities was very high. Quality checks had to become more rigorous, more consistent, and more standardized.

Once again, the bioMérieux teams worked hard to meet these challenges. They not only had to adapt their clinical know-how to the food and pharmaceutical worlds, but also understand the specific language of these new customers, their practices, and their needs. Isabelle Desforges, Deputy Director of Scientific Affairs for Food Business, recalls:

"*In the 90s, some of our customers were already industrial laboratories, but we weren't really aware of it, nor did we do any promotion for it. Those laboratories were either food processing or pharmaceutical facilities, or service providers. They turned to us for scientific advice or for information, and this forced us to recruit the first people dedicated to R&D for industrial activities. Then, a decision was made to create positions 100% dedicated to these customers, and finally, we can say that it was under the impetus of the customers themselves that an industry unit was created, which was called Unit 4 at the time. From then on, we began recruiting for marketing and sales activities, in France at first, then in a few other European countries.*"

Above all, the catalyst for fast development came from adapting the VIDAS® system to this new market. As soon as it was released in 1992, the VIDAS® Listeria test was awarded first prize for innovation at an international contest held in Paris. In 1993, a salmonella detection test was put on the market, then a complete range of culture media was created in the mid-90s.

From shampoo to chocolate bars, from hamburgers to headache pills, microbiology tracks down bacteria at each stage of the manufacturing and marketing of food or pharmaceutical products. The production lines in Craponne, France, and in Lombard, United States, specialize in responding to the highly technical production and quality requirements of the sector. The venture is a success. Ten years after its creation, the industrial microbiology unit passed the symbolic milestone of 100 million euros in sales.

Just as it did in the clinical field, bioMérieux focused on innovation. In 2005, it launched TEMPO®, a pioneering solution for enumerating microbial flora directly inspired by the VITEK® card model for the clinical sector, but 100% dedicated to the food processing market. In 2015, GENE-UP® arrived on the market. This molecular biology platform, specifically designed for the food industry, is the result of our collaboration with BioFire, an American company acquired by bioMérieux a year earlier, which we will tell you about in the next podcast.

bioMérieux also capitalized on great growth opportunities via strategic buyouts. For instance, following integration of the Australian company BTF in 2007, it acquired AES CHEMUNEX in 2011, ranked 5th in the world for industrial microbiological control and the leader in the use of flow cytometry for industrial microbiological applications. AES brought bioMérieux a range of innovative tests and automated analyzers for the control of microbial contaminants, as well as two new industrial sites in Brittany, at Combourg and Ker Lann, where more than 270 employees are still working today. This was a strategic, targeted takeover, as Félix Montero Julian, Global Scientific Director for Pharmaceutical Quality Control, puts it: *“The acquisition of AES in 2011 was a pivotal step in the development of the industry because AES was very focused on the development aspect of culture media for the food industry, but there were also systems very relevant to the pharmaceutical industry and in particular, for example, the SCANRDI®: a system which is widely used today to perform fast sterility testing.”*

The acquisition of the German company *Hyglos,* in 2016, focused on the detection of endotoxins using an eco-sustainable product called “recombinant Factor C”, and allowed us to expand the offer to the quality control of pharmaceutical products. The subsequent acquisition of the American company *Invisible Sentinel*, in 2019, brought new molecular diagnostic solutions for the detection of food contaminants.

The industrial microbiology unit has become, in three decades, an extraordinary driver of innovation and growth for bioMérieux. It now accounts for 15% of bioMérieux's total sales. Alexandre Mérieux, who headed the unit from 2006 to 2011, testifies:
“*Historically, the industry used to grow alongside its clinical big brother by adapting clinical R&D developments, but growth now comes from having its own dedicated solutions, which it now manages from an R&D point of view, as well as from a manufacturing point of view—that’s a pretty significant jump in maturity. I think the unit has kept its pioneering spirit of being a business within a business and of continuing to chart its course as a little brother, or as a slightly more flexible unit with a winning customer culture. Afterwards, I think there was positive development in the activity, in its turnover; it became structured. Today there is a PNL that is specific to the industry, which was not the case in my time; I think that’s a rather good thing. We have strengthened our leadership, and I think that what is also not bad in terms of development is to be a bit more of a player now within the production sites. So, it’s a move that is more industrial and that goes in the right direction for me.”*

Driven by a strong spirit of innovation, the industrial microbiology unit meets the needs of customers better than ever in the food industry, with new approaches combining diagnostics, bioinformatics, and data science to prevent contamination in production lines. In the pharmaceutical field, bioMérieux provides quality control for the production of vaccines and drugs, and today even supports the manufacturing of cell and gene therapies, a new and very promising field, particularly for the treatment of blood cancers.

In the next podcast, we’ll discuss another area that has experienced rapid development in the last few decades: molecular biology! Stay tuned!