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Vitaly Abramov: “The Russian Supplement Market Is Growing By Double Digits, With Demand Shifting Toward A More Conscious Approach”

VARSEAS (LLC AS RS) is a Russian innovative biotechnology company specializing in the full-cycle development and production of bioactive ingredients. Its primary focus is on marine undenatured collagen derived from deep-sea mollusk tissues. We discussed the development of modern biotechnologies in Russia and dietary supplement market prospects with Vitaly Abramov, founder of VARSEAS brand.

What inspired you to start your biotechnology journey and launch the VARSEAS brand?

After creating several companies in the manufacturing sector, I was looking for a project that would leave a mark, not just bring profit. In 2018, I came across a scientific development that could not be brought to an industrial scale. The technology existed, and some research had been conducted, but there was a lack of evidence base and business expertise for industrial implementation.

Once I realized the scale of the project and that it involved the world's only production technology for undenatured marine

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collagen, the decision was made. For the first time in my career, I told myself: if anything goes wrong, I am the only one to blame. If it works, it is also my achievement. Such a level of personal responsibility inspires me more than any financial figures.

How did you come up with the idea of producing undenatured marine collagen?

I didn't seek out the idea—it found me. The unique innovation demanded more than just funding; it required expertise in setting up manufacturing from the ground up, navigating regulatory landscapes, and managing logistics and market entry. Once I dove into the topic, I realized the scale of its uniqueness. There are thousands of products labeled 'collagen' on the market, but the vast majority are hydrolysates or gelatin, where the original protein structure is destroyed. Only we produce native collagen with a preserved triple-helical structure on an industrial scale. Opportunities like this only come once in a lifetime.

How do you assess the current state of the bioactive ingredients and food supplements market in Russia?

The market is growing at double-digit rates and demand is high, but development remains chaotic. The main issues are terminological confusion and widespread counterfeiting. Packages labeled "collagen" often contain nothing but a mix of amino acids, while products claimed to be "native" turn out to be hydrolyzed. This creates a vicious cycle: consumers buy the product, see no results, and lose faith in the entire category. Ultimately, honest manufacturers are the ones who suffer. We constantly face a lack of trust in our product's effectiveness because clients have already been burned by counterfeits. We have to do more than just sell; we have to convince the market and prove our differences. However, there is a positive trend: the demand for evidence-based information is growing, consumers are becoming more educated, and a culture of reading ingredient lists is emerging.

Which macro trends, in your opinion, shape up the demand for marine collagen products on the domestic and international markets?

This is primarily conscious consumption. People have stopped blindly believing advertising; they have begun studying ingredients and demanding scientific evidence. This plays into the hands of manufacturers of high-quality products. Next is the demand for preventive medicine instead of treating consequences, which became especially pronounced after the pandemic. People are willing to invest in maintaining their health. In this context, collagen is not a cosmetic product, but a functional ingredient for joints, skin, and connective tissues.

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After 2022, there has been a sharp increase in demand for import substitution, but of high quality. Consumers want Russian products that are not inferior to or superior to imported ones. The international market is moving towards transparency of raw material origin and proven bioavailability. Asian markets are particularly sensitive to scientific justification and are willing to pay for proven quality.

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Which barriers to the growth of innovative ingredient production in Russia are the most critical, in your view?

Long and unpredictable registration and certification timelines mean it can take two to three years from product readiness to legal market presence. During this time, the market changes, competitors copy the idea, and investments are frozen. Furthermore, the complexity of registration does not correlate with innovation—copies and fundamentally new developments undergo the same lengthy procedure.

The lack of clear terminology in legislation allows anything to be labeled as collagen. We are fighting for the integrity of the category, but it is legally impossible to prohibit such terminology manipulation. For us, this results in direct financial losses—we have to spend resources on educating the market instead of developing the product.

Targeted state support specifically for innovative developments is also insufficient. Most programs are aimed at import substitution through copying Western technologies, rather than creating fundamentally new solutions. Another issue is the difficulty of accessing international markets due to the non-recognition of Russian quality standards.

In which segments do you see the greatest potential for exporting Russian bioactive ingredients?

Premium cosmetics for Asian markets, where there is a sophisticated consumer culture and a science-based approach to product evaluation. Nutraceuticals for the Middle East, driven by a growing middle class and rising demand for premium health products; this market is less regulated than Europe yet highly affluent. Pharmaceutical ingredients represent a long-term strategy, requiring years of certification.

The core principle is to avoid price dumping or positioning as a "cheap alternative." Instead, the focus is on competing through superior quality, unique technology, and scientific validation.

What sets your undenatured collagen apart from other types of collagen on the market?

Undenatured collagen retains its native triple-helical structure, undamaged by thermal or chemical processing. Most manufacturers use high-temperature treatment, which destroys the spatial structure of the molecule. This results in a set of peptides or amino acids—this is already a denatured form with different properties and bioavailability.

Our technology is based on low-temperature extraction that preserves the native structure. This is the world's only method for

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industrial production of undenatured collagen from marine raw materials. The difference is not a marketing spin, but fundamental. It is like comparing a fresh egg to egg powder—technically both contain protein, but their properties are radically different.

What key scientific discoveries or technologies enabled you to establish industrial production of the product?

Our core technology is a low-temperature extraction method that preserves the native protein structure. The development process took several years and involved a full R&D cycle with the participation of scientific institutions. While technical details are confidential, the key point is: we did not adapt existing technology, but created a completely new one.

Our raw material is deep-sea giant squid. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that its collagen structure is as close as possible to human collagen, with a 98% biocompatibility rate. This is a fundamental difference from terrestrial collagen sources. That is precisely why we chose this type of marine raw material, despite the complexity of working with it.

A critical quality control system is implemented at every stage of production, along with specialized handling of marine raw materials, which require strict logistics and storage conditions. The technology has been verified by Swiss experts who analyzed the process and product for several months.

We have a series of peer-reviewed publications in both Russian and international scientific journals, with patent applications filed for various production technologies—ranging from hemostatic sponges to quality control methods. The product’s efficacy is supported by research from the Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University and Kursk State Medical University. These studies demonstrate the high efficiency of intact protein complexes, the formation of a stable cellular monolayer, and a complete lack of cytotoxicity. This establishes a solid scientific foundation for potential applications in the pharmaceutical industry.

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What international standards does your company adhere to in terms of quality and research?

We operate in compliance with ISO 9001 for quality management systems and ISO 22000 for food safety. Our pharmaceutical ingredients are manufactured according to GMP requirements. Prior to 2022, while collaborating with international partners, our products underwent expert evaluation for compliance with Swiss and European standards.

The main principle is not to produce to the minimum requirements of Russian legislation, but to perform in compliance with the strictest international standards from the start. It is more expensive and complex, but it provides a competitive advantage and opens up the global market.

How do you assess the potential for applying your products in related industries, such as pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and sports nutrition?

Nutraceuticals and cosmetics are our core business areas today. In the food supplement and nutraceutical segment, we are seeing the highest demand, with a clear need for evidence-based products with a solid scientific foundation.

Cosmetics is our second key area; our ingredients are used by premium brands. Native collagen works differently in cosmetics compared to hydrolyzed collagen, providing an advantage to manufacturers willing to invest in high-quality formulas.

Sports nutrition is a promising area for joint and ligament recovery. Athletes are an educated audience who understand the difference between collagen types and are willing to pay for effectiveness.

Pharmaceuticals is our long-term strategic goal today, the most challenging direction that requires years of clinical trials and drug registration. It is potentially the largest-scale, but it is an investment for years to come.

Do you think the current regulatory framework is sufficient to stimulate innovation in the industry?

Definitely not. The current regulatory framework prioritizes the 'do no harm' principle over promoting excellence. It fails to distinguish between pioneering, unique technology and a simple copycat product. There are no mechanisms in place to provide a competitive advantage to those investing in research and creating groundbreaking innovations.

We need a system that severely cracks down on counterfeiting while simultaneously stimulating true innovation through tax

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incentives, expedited procedures, and priority export support. Currently, investing in R&D and creating unique products is often less economically viable than copying someone else's work and selling it cheaper.

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How much do regulatory requirements affect the time-to-market for new products? What legislative changes would facilitate the work of innovative bioproduct manufacturers?

Registering a food supplement with a unique formula takes just as long as registering a standard formula—at least one and a half to two years. The paradox is that the more innovative the product, the more questions regulators have, and the longer the process takes. There is a lack of understanding that innovation should be stimulated by speed, not hindered by over-caution.

There are two key issues that are critical for us. First, the lack of a clear legal definition for 'undenatured collagen' forces us to explain what it is and how it differs every single time. No category, no standard—no fast-track registration. Second, there is no fast-track procedure for products with a solid scientific base. Despite having publications, patents, and validation from leading medical universities, this provides no advantage in registration speed.

A priority registration mechanism is required for products with proven scientific novelty, conditional on the submission of an expanded research package. This would stimulate R&D investment.

What measures do you consider necessary to combat terminological chaos in the industry?

We need legislative definition with independent conformity assessment at the registration stage; a public register of non-conformities with product inspection results—consumers must be able to verify if a product matches its declared composition; fines proportional to the benefit from deception—not symbolic amounts, but a percentage of revenue. We need fines commensurate with the benefits of deception — not symbolic amounts, but a percentage of revenue; educational work with consumers on how to read ingredient labels and tougher requirements for advertising claims — any claim regarding efficacy must be supported by available research.

Do you consider it important for industry associations and working groups to participate in the development of standards?

Industry associations are vital, but their efficiency depends on the operational setup. A major problem is that participating manufacturers often send staff focused on sales and marketing instead of technological standards.

Effective performance requires a balance of interests. Working groups on standardization must include production engineers, the scientific community, independent experts, and consumer representatives. Quality standard decisions should be based on

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scientific data and production reality, rather than commercial compromises.

Process transparency is essential—all proposed standards must be published for public consultation before approval. Associations should not only formulate standards but also actively participate in their enforcement—conduct independent audits of member products and publish the results.

The association's mission is to protect the interests of both consumers and quality producers. It must create an environment where honest manufacturers are encouraged to stay honest, and violators face economic consequences. This is the only way industry self-regulation can serve the best interests of the whole market.

Are there prospects for digital labeling and transparency of ingredient origin? What additional quality control measures are necessary?

The compulsory labeling system 'Chestny ZNAK' for dietary supplements in Russia is already in place and being implemented. It is a reality, not a prospect. Technically, the capability to track the product from manufacturer to consumer exists.

It is important to understand that labeling verifies the legality of the product's circulation, not the composition of a specific package. The code confirms that the product was legally manufactured and passed through official distribution channels. However, it does not show whether the actual composition matches what is declared on the label.

The next step is voluntary transparency of manufacturers through QR codes with access to test reports, information on raw material origin, and laboratory control results. The technology for this exists, but it is a manufacturer's initiative, not a legal requirement.

Transparency is a competitive advantage for honest producers, allowing us to showcase real data. The challenge is whether the industry is ready for this level of openness.

Could you evaluate the prospects for Russian products in the global collagen market, including premium segments?

The global collagen market shows double-digit growth, driven by the dynamic and profitable premium segment. With strict compliance with international standards and proven scientific evidence, the outlook is very promising.

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Our experience has shown: the main thing is the real uniqueness of the technology. Undenatured marine collagen with a structure as close as possible to human is not a copy of existing products, but a fundamentally different solution. This is precisely what can open the doors to demanding markets.

It is critical to avoid falling into price competition. Positioning as 'cheaper than imported' is a dead end for the premium segment. Competition must be driven by technology, scientific data, and proven efficiency.

The market is large, and there is room for different players. Our goal is to find our niche where our unique technology provides a competitive advantage. This requires patience, substantial investment in R&D, and a willingness to take a long-term path without quick returns.

Which international markets are you primarily interested in and why?

The current geopolitical situation significantly influences market selection. The Asia-Pacific region is a priority. Japan and South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia remain in our focus. There is an educated premium consumer segment there, ready to analyze product features and pay for verified quality. The Japanese market is particularly demanding—they will not buy based on flashy messaging only; data and evidence are required.

The Middle East is a truly accessible destination. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are actively developing economic ties with Russia, and there are no political barriers. The region boasts high purchasing power and a growing interest in premium health and beauty products.

China is a challenging market. They are the largest producers of hydrolyzed collagen themselves, offering very low prices. Competing there is difficult; it requires a clear niche and a solid understanding of what unique value we can offer.

How do foreign market regulations differ from the Russian system, and how does this affect your plans?

In Russia, one often encounters subjective interpretations of the same requirements by different experts. What is accepted by one organization may be rejected by another without clear explanation. Requirements can change in the middle of the document review process.

Japanese and Korean markets have stricter quality requirements but more transparent procedures. There, a single case of non-

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compliance can ruin a reputation forever. In Russia, the risks for unscrupulous manufacturers are significantly lower.

This influences our strategy: we initially target the requirements of these markets, as they are some of the strictest in the world. We undergo certification to their standards and conduct research based on their requirements. After that, adaptation to Russian requirements usually presents no issues. The European market remains a long-term prospect, but not a current priority.

What steps are necessary for the recognition of Russian quality standards on the international stage?

In the current context, the systematic recognition of Russian standards is more of a long-term prospect. The political situation influences mutual recognition processes of certification.

At the same time, this is not critical for operating in international markets. The Asia-Pacific region and the Middle East are open to cooperation and evaluate products based on their actual characteristics. There, independent studies and actual quality are more important.

Our strategy hinges on adhering to the highest international standards from day one. Operating under ISO, we conduct research tailored to target market requirements and leverage independent expert evaluations. We publish our findings in peer-reviewed international journals and cooperate with accredited laboratories.

When a partner evaluates a product, they look at concrete data and results, rather than formal certificates. That is exactly where we place our bets—building a reputation through validated quality and transparency to audits. This approach works in markets that are open to dialogue.

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