

GROCERY: GOURMET SMORGASBORD

By Richard Turcsik

SEPTEMBER 15, 2004 -- Salt, the original seasoning, is suddenly chic. Judging by the variety of salts on display at this summer's Fancy Food Show in New York, salt is going to be the next big thing, or, at the very least, up there with spreads, salad dressings, artificial caviar, teas, and desserts in terms of unique products that will be impacting the gourmet aisle, and eventually the center store at large.

"We've been attending the Fancy Food Show for five years, and we've been seeing more mainstream supermarkets attending," says Harry T. Jones, president of Blackberry Patch, a Thomasville, Ga.-based manufacturer of premium syrups that are marketed under the Blackberry Patch name in gift and gourmet stores, and as Mama's Choice in the supermarket channel. "I think the Chicago show has helped that, and when the retailers attend as part of FMI, that helps with the exposure for the New York show," he says.

Among the chains spied on the show floor this year were folks from Kroger, Food Lion, A&P, Kings, and Wegmans. And the independents were out in force, too.

"I liked all the new cheeses that were there, and all of the accoutrements to put on them," says Cindy Palmer, creative director at Palmer's Market, an upscale independent in Darien, Conn.

Scott Palmer (no relation), owner of the Cedar Cafe, says he cruised the aisles looking for trends that might make their way onto the menu of his noted Mediterranean shish kebab restaurant in Hanover, Mass. "I was really impressed with the ethnic side of it," he says of the show. "A lot of the Middle Eastern and other ethnic products that were available were really beautiful-looking and nicely designed. They have nice products now, and a lot of them fit into our more health-conscious society."

"The New York Fancy Food Show is where they break out new products, and it's good to see what trends are emerging or what new items are popping up," says Steve LeFevre, a category specialist at A.J.'s Purveyor of Fine Foods, the upscale division of Chandler, Ariz.-based Bashas'. He's still digesting what he saw at the show, which took place in late June. "We're still sifting through the mountain of information. We've been in contact with a number of people to kind of bring that along," he says.

Some of those are likely salt companies. "At the Fancy Food Shows, I noticed more sea salts and indigenous salts from different areas of the world, like the Himalayas, the Mediterranean, and the coast of Britain," adds LeFevre. "People seem to be mining more unique salts now."

RealSalt mines its raw materials from tunnels 200 feet beneath an ancient seabed of rock salt in Utah that dates back to the Jurassic Era. "We take the rock salt out, crush it up, and put it right in the shaker," says Rusty Anderson, marketing director at Redmond RealSalt in Springville, Utah.

Unlike mainstream brands that are bleached white, RealSalt has hues of black from manganese and red from iron, which, when ground up, result in a consistent light-pinkish color. The level of naturally occurring iodine is lower than in commercial salts, but consumers don't have to worry about waking up with a goiter because there's so much iodine in the American diet from other foods, says Anderson. "There are a lot of health benefits from RealSalt," he notes. "We can't make health benefit claims; however, the testimonials we get back from our customers say that this salt, for some reason, doesn't affect their blood pressure."

Still, after sampling RealSalt, Fancy Food Show visitors worked up quite a thirst. Luckily tea samples were never far away, since interest in the beverage continues to brew, steeped in health claims that seem to pop up almost weekly.

Nowadays tea can also be pretty to look at. Numi Tea, for example, expects the market for tea flowers --hand-sewn silk sachets of tea wrapped around rosebuds and other flowers -- to blossom. When placed in hot water, the sachets "bloom" into beautiful multi-petal flowers. They cost more than a traditional tea bag, but can be used several times. Numi is also promoting other teas packaged in bags made of silk, instead of the nylon ones used by the major companies. "This should be a real new trend and is really taking tea to a new level," says Reem Rahim, co-owner of Oakland, Calif.-based Numi.

Things may be heating up for Numi, but over at Ito En, things are running hot and cold -- and that's a good thing. "We have a new line called Hot-Cold Tea," explains Yoshie Yano-Pennings, sales & marketing manager at Ito En (North America), Inc. in Brooklyn, N.Y., a division of Japan's largest green tea company. The line is packaged in heat-durable plastic bottles, so it can be sold either hot or cold in Pure Green, Green Jasmine, and Golden Oolong varieties. "We have a special unit called Hot and Cooler," says Yano-Pennings, pointing to a tabletop display case. "The upper shelf is heated, so the bottles are hot, while down on the bottom shelf they are cold."

Room for dessert

It's also best not to allow oxygen in the bottle, since that leads to oxidation, which causes spoilage. That's one of the secrets behind Anteadote, a new bottled tea from Adagio that uses Japanese technology to extract the oxygen from each bottle. "By taking the air out, the tea can't oxidize, and without oxidation it can't spoil, so there's no need to add any chemicals or preservatives," says Michael Cramer, marketing manager at Adagio Teas in Clifton, N.J.

If ready-to-drink items have hurt the field of reading tea leaves, now more bad news is in the cards: Adagio is marketing ingenious iTEA, a unique patented pot for brewing loose tea. Users put the tea in the pot, add hot water or place the pot in a microwave oven,

PROGRESSIVE GROCER

AHEAD OF WHAT'S NEXT

let the tea steep, and place the pot over a cup. A sensor in the bottom of the pot releases the tea while straining the tea leaves and keeping them out of the cup. "It's a \$15 item that's microwave- and dishwasher-safe, and very light so people can take it with them when they travel," notes Cramer.

Legendary Junior's Cheesecake, which made its debut at the New York edition of the Fancy Food Show, is now making its way into the upscale supermarket channel. Alan Rosen, the third-generation owner of Brooklyn, N.Y.-based Junior's, says he received a lot of interest from the supermarket channel while exhibiting at this latest Fancy Food Show. "I want our product to do our walking and talking, and that's what I want to drive us into the supermarkets -- no other deals," he says, referring to slotting allowances.

Since Junior's cakes are sold frozen, they might end up merchandised next to another gourmet dessert treat: Jerusalem's Famous Gourmet Chocolate Rugalach, imported from Israel by Jerusalem Gourmet Products in Garden City, N.Y. and distributed by Westbury, N.Y.-based Kosher Depot. "If it's sold frozen, our product has a six-month shelf life, but many retailers sell it refrigerated, where it has a three-month shelf life, or it can have a shelf-stable life of up to 30 days," says Georgia Cleary, director of sales and marketing at Jerusalem Gourmet. The rugalach is available in a 2.2-pound (one-kilo) box that retails for \$32.95, but this month a one-pound box, an eight-piece pack, and a bulk pack are being introduced.

What better way is there to bring out the rich chocolate flavor of rugalach than to enjoy a nice glass of wine? And what better accompaniment to bring out the flavor of the wine than a California Wine Wafer? "You take a bite of the wafer, chew, and right before you swallow, you take a sip of wine," explains Jiri Knedlik, owner/cookie maker of Sacramento Cookie Factory in California. The wafers are available in Lemon Vanilla for white wine and Mocha Chocolate for red. The dessert-plate-size wafers, made from a recipe dating from 1640, are baked, aged 12 days, filled, and then baked again. "There is nothing like this on the market," says Knedlik. "I've done wine tastings all over California, where people have gone crazy for them."

People also go crazy for caviar, but with Beluga retailing for \$150 to \$250 an ounce, many balk at the price. Black Label Caviar was at the show offering an alternative: Royal Roe from Granoff Caviar, an all-natural, non-fish-egg "caviar" imported from France and made from fish oil, fish protein, egg whites, and sea salt. "It's full of omega-3 fatty acids, protein, and has no saturated fat, no cholesterol, no carbs, and very low sodium," says Edward Kleydman, v.p. at Black Label Caviar in Staten Island, N.Y. "Plus it doesn't break down in heat, so you can cook with it."

Caviar is getting competition in the upscale spread market from Private Harvest, which is marketing a new line of spreads as toppers for soft cheese. Packaged in six-ounce glass jars, the spreads are available in Cranberries & Wine, Pear, Sundried Tomato, and Caramel Nut. "Retailers can cross-merchandise these over the cheese case because cheese is so popular now," says Jon Plante, e.v.p. at Private Harvest in Lakeport, Calif. "Around the holidays

you can make a simple, elegant, and easy appetizer. Simply pour this over a wheel of Brie and you're ready to go."

Pour some Mama's Choice Red Ripe Strawberry Syrup over a bowl of vanilla ice cream, and consumers are ready for dessert, says Blackberry Patch's Jones. "There's nothing else like it," he observes of the product, made from fruit slowly cooked in open kettles. "You can put it on pancakes, waffles, or bagels, and kids like to make a soft drink out of it by mixing it with sparkling water."

Buyers were also looking at jams and spreads from Organic High Desert Foods. Grown on a 42-acre farm in Durango, Colo. at an elevation of 6,500 feet, the 7.5-ounce jars retail for up to \$10. "The stresses in our high-desert environment enhance the flavor," says president Bill Manning. "We have peak temperature fluctuations that are high during the day and cool at night. That helps the sugar and other complex flavor notes."

Complex flavor notes are also what set Live A Little Gourmet refrigerated salad dressings apart from conventional dressings. "The salad dressings that I manufacture are made just like you would at home, in small batches, and put right in the refrigerator," explains Virginia Davis, president and executive chef at Live A Little Gourmet Foods in Newark, Calif. "We don't cook or process them. We use only fresh garlic, fresh shallots, and no dehydrated produce. Those green dots that you see are actually scallions, and not some powdered form."

Retailers were stopping by the RP's Pasta Co. booth for a quick demonstration on how consumers could make homemade gnocchi and pasta in a matter of minutes just by using a bag of its Ecco La Pasta gnocchi or pasta flour, some water, and an electric mixer or fork. "If you have true fresh homemade pasta, you'll never go back," says Peter Robinson, president of the Madison, Wis.-based firm.

Show attendees were going nuts over the nuts displayed by Mama Mellace's Old Word Treats of Carlsbad, Calif. "The nice thing about all of our products is that they are roasted in water instead of oil, so there's no cholesterol, sodium, or added butter," says marketing manager Heidi L. Smith of her line of almonds, pecans, and cashews. "And by roasting the nut in water, it helps retain its natural healthiness. The almond retains all of its natural fiber and potassium, plus it actually has fewer calories than a raw nut because roasting in water pulls some of the calories out."

Too bad that same principle doesn't apply to the water bath used to make creme brulee.