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Flavor Diversity Spices Up Cheese

The giant \$21.7 billion cheese category shows no end of growth in sight, supported by expanding flavor variety.

Walk down any cheese aisle and it's clear that consumers are welcoming new flavor profiles. Variety abounds from bold and spicy cheeses infused with habanero peppers or horseradish to sweet, savory and herb- and nut-flavored fare like cinnamon and maple. These flavors are joined by the likes of coffee and lavender found in rubbed-rind cheeses.

The category is also innovating to include more low-fat, low-sodium and natural options. New flavor profiles are evident within the vast natural cheese segment, which encompasses commercially produced as well as many artisan and specialty cheeses. Some producers are even combining health-conscious trends with popular flavorings, such as Land O' Lakes®¹ 30% Less Sodium American Deli Cheese Product with Sea Salt.

The American Cheese Society (ACS), which supports the promotion of Americas-produced artisan, farmstead and specialty cheeses, has seen a flavor bonanza among its member base. "We attribute this largely to consumer interest and demand," says Nora Weiser, ACS executive director. In fact, in 2013, ACS created a separate category

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for flavored cheese entries in its annual awards. “In the 2014 competition, the flavor profiles seen in winning cheeses included coconut, fig, orange, Cajun spice as well as chocolate and cherry,” Weiser says.

What bodes well for palates also works for cheese producers. “From the cheesemaker’s perspective, developing a range of flavored cheese may allow for a product line expansion without the costs and logistical challenges that come with developing entirely new recipes,” Weiser says, noting “By adding layers of flavors such as herbs, fruits and spices to an existing base, small cheesemakers are able to open to many new marketing opportunities, particularly seasonal ones.”

Flavor Trend Drivers

In particular, cheeses with bold, spicy and robust flavors are in demand, driven by U.S. cultural diversity, including the Hispanic influence, and even demographics like aging taste buds. On the other hand, interest in Latin and Mediterranean cuisine translates to milder cheeses with varieties like queso fresco, Cotija and feta, according to the International Dairy-Deli-Bakery Association (IDDBA).

Millennials (born in the early 1980s to early 2000s) are enthusiastic supporters of flavor diversity. In a news release on cheese trends by the IDDBA, Jennifer Giambroni, director of communications, California Milk Advisory Board, says: “Millennials really could be considered the ‘cheese generation’ — they grew up eating it, they have been exposed to many new varieties of cheese beyond commodity cheese and they have an adventurous spirit.”

Weiser of ACS adds: “Consumers are open to adding new products to their cheese plates, and they often seek out seasonal and locally driven flavors.” For instance, the Texas Hill Country region boasts goat cheese producers such as CKC Farms, which makes brine-aged feta with roasted garlic and sun-dried tomatoes.

Or, from a national cheese manufacturer, consider this regional mashup: Sargento® Chef Blends™ Shredded 4 State Cheddar™ Cheese² combines three sharp cheddars — hailing from Wisconsin, Vermont and New York — with mild California cheddar.

Driven by consumer demand, including cultural diversity and appreciation for novelty, there seems to be no limits to the flavor innovations consumers will embrace in the future.

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Sources/Legal

[1] Land O' Lakes is a registered trademark of Land O' Lakes, Inc.

[2] Sargento, Chef Blends, and 4 State Cheddar are trademarks of Sargento Foods, Inc.

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