

Plant-forward, cheese-centric new product innovation



Source: Nestle S.A., Mann Packing Co.

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CHICAGO – Current culinary culture may be focusing on plant-based foods, but increasingly, innovators are not targeting vegan. This is because many recognize the functionality and nutrition cheese brings to all types of plant-forward formulations.

Cheese adds flavor, color and visual appeal. It contributes important nutrients – most notably protein and calcium – and in some applications, functionality, as it provides a cohesive mass to bind other ingredients, including vegetables and seasonings.

With hundreds of varieties of cheese to choose from, it's easy to be creative and provide consumers culinary adventure. Frozen lasagna may be enhanced when imported pecorino Romano is blended into the ricotta. A boxed macaroni and cheese kit may be considered gourmet when the sauce packet is based on Gouda. And including diced feta in a fresh cous cous salad adds authenticity.

Snack food manufacturers also recognize that cheese – as is, often in cube form – adds value to refrigerated grab-and-go mini meals. It also may be baked into bars and crackers, offering low-carbohydrate dieters a crunchy, salty snack.

Cheese consumption in the United States is at an all-time high. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service reported that in 2016, per capita consumption of natural and processed cheese varieties reached 43.6 lbs.

Most of the use is not as a cube, slice or stick. It is in prepared and packaged food applications. Marketers recognize that “made with real cheese” adds value to all types of foods.

Bob Evans Farms Inc., a business unit of Post Holdings Inc., St. Louis, has been making quick-to-table food for more than 60 years. Its latest innovation is a line of refrigerated meal solutions, including Family Classics roasted chicken alfredo pasta. The fully cooked microwavable meal features oven-roasted meat and penne pasta in an alfredo sauce, which is made with milk, butter and Parmesan cheese.



“Our consumers have been requesting new delicious, protein-filled foods from us to make their mealtime easier and more filling,” said Chris Lambrix, senior vice-president of retail business development. “We’ve listened and have been busy in the kitchen finding the solution.”

Nestle USA, Rosslyn, Va., is expanding the menu of its better-for-you frozen food brand Lean Cuisine with Origins, a line of 14 meatless comfort dishes made with at least 70% organic ingredients. The company’s culinary team

selected accessible ingredients to put a new flavorful twist on plant-based proteins and vegetables, playing at the intersection of a desire for meatless options and an increasing demand for organic foods. But meatless does not mean vegan.

The butternut squash lasagna, for example, contains organic pasta, butternut squash, goat cheese, spinach and warm spices to deliver 17 grams of protein. The limited-edition roasted garlic white bean alfredo features organic fettucine, spinach and yellow carrots covered with a creamy roasted garlic Great Northern bean alfredo cheese sauce.

Another specialty is the linguine with meatless meatballs. The meatballs are made by combining organic ricotta cheese with spinach and other ingredients, including Parmesan cheese. The latter not only contributes a savory umami taste, it also assists with binding ingredients, much like breadcrumbs, and is a source of protein.

In the produce department, Mann Packing Co., Salinas, Calif., which was acquired by Coral Gables, Fla.-based Fresh Del Monte Produce in February, is growing its Nourish Bowls line with two plant-based protein vegetable noodle bowls intended to be microwaved for a hot meal. Though they both include a vegan meat alternative – basil pesto is made with vegan Chick’n while tomato Bolognese includes vegan sausage – they also both contain Parmesan cheese.

Cece’s Veggie Co., an Austin, Texas-based food brand known for shaking up the produce department with fresh vegetable innovations, is launching a new product concept: butternut shells and cheese. A remake of the classic macaroni and cheese made with pasta, the new take is gluten-free and offers fresh, 100% organic butternut squash cut into elbow-style shells covered in organic cheese sauce. The line includes a dairy-based cheddar cheese sauce and a vegan cheddar option. Both are prepped and ready to heat-and-eat with no additional ingredients required.

“Delivering a full serving of veggie nutrition in every bowl, Cece’s butternut shells and cheese is a game-changer for busy families looking for healthy, organic meal solutions that taste delicious,” said Mason Arnold, founder.

Making childhood nutrition a priority, Kidfresh, New York, has added gluten-free and organic products to its frozen meal line. The company is focusing on taking youngsters’ favorite foods and adding a wholesome parent-approved twist, with grains and vegetables in every meal, and many containing cheese. New options include gluten-free white mac and cheese and ham and cheese junior burritos. Both are made with cheddar cheese, with front labels touting “nothing artificial” and protein content.



In the snacking section of retailers’ freezers, there’s new Nancy’s Petite Stuffed Bagels from The Kraft Heinz Co., Chicago. Ready-to-serve in minutes, the bite-size stuffed bagels come in four flavors – apple cinnamon, jalapeño, original and pumpkin – all made with Philadelphia brand cream cheese.



Snacking has become a new way of eating, with 9 in 10 consumers snacking multiple times throughout the day, according to The Hartman Group, Bellevue, Wash. This makes snacking the most significant eating occasion for food innovators to target, and many are including cheese in premium products designed for adult taste preferences. This includes refrigerated snack packs containing everything from hard-boiled eggs to nuts to salami.

Product developers also are turning cheese into salty, crunchy snacks, which are often one of the first foods eliminated in low-carbohydrate and keto diets. Their elimination is not because of sodium or fat content, rather, it’s to avoid the starchy carbohydrates – namely corn, grains and potatoes – that these chips, crackers and curls contain. As a result, one thing both types of dieters crave is crunch. Many have found baked or dehydrated 100% cheese snacks to satisfy.

Sonoma Creamery, Sonoma, Calif., now offers Sonoma Cheese Crisp Bars, which are savory baked snack bars made with only a few ingredients, including cheese, organic brown rice, organic oat bran, seeds and seasonings. Varieties are: bacon cheddar, cheddar, Parmesan, pepper jack and savory seed. High in protein and low in carbohydrates, they have zero grams of sugar and 110 to 120 calories per two-bar pack.

“America’s eating habits are now in rapid transition,” said John Crean, president and chief executive officer of Sonoma. “As busy as people are, and as action-packed as our lives are in the digital age, fewer and fewer people have the time to prepare or eat three large sit-down meals. Increasingly, consumers are eating five to seven smaller meals throughout the day. This both fits their active lifestyles and, as some research suggests, may be healthier in the long run for our digestion and even promote weight loss.”

Frito Lay, Plano, Texas, a business unit of PepsiCo, Inc., is taking a different spin on cheese snacks with new Stacy’s Cheese Petites. These bite-size cheese snacks are made with Parmesan or Romano cheeses and seasonings. The snacks come in 4-oz multi-serving bags, with a single serving about 14 pieces and providing 140 calories, 7 grams of fat, 13 grams of carbohydrate (no sugars) and 6 grams of protein.



The Crunchmaster brand of gluten-free crackers and crisps from TH Foods Inc., Loves Park, Ill., is growing with the roll-out of vegetable cheese crisps. The crisps are made with seven vegetables – spinach, kale, carrot, red pepper, pumpkin, beet and onion – plus cheese baked right in. The three featured cheeses are asiago, Parmesan Romano and white cheddar.

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