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Finding Your Way with Gourmet
Selling gourmet products should be an opportunity, not a challenge.

This Month's Issue

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same. Al Hamman, owner of Hamman Marketing Associates, Johnson City, TN, agrees, “The line seems to have blurred in many people’s minds.” But natural and organic foods are not always produced or packaged in a way that represents the gourmet ideal, and gourmet products do not always uphold the standards of what constitutes a natural or organic food product.

Rachel Oriana Schraeder, sales and marketing director for Sierra Nevada Cheese Company, Willows, CA, adds, “Fancy does not inherently mean healthy.” Understanding these nuances can give retailers the distinct advantage of stocking products that offer both.

However, retailers should be careful when bringing in products labeled gourmet. Beth Bitzegaio, national sales manager for Nielsen-Massey Vanillas, Waukegan, IL, warns, “The use of the word ‘gourmet’ has been watered down by the number of products, both mass-market and specialty, that now use this term in their labeling, advertising and descriptions. Companies must be able to tell the story of their products in a way that differentiates them more than just the word ‘gourmet.’”

Consumers tend to crave a backstory for their foods, and increased sales in products known as artisan speak to this. The Monroes define this popular type of product: “It usually signifies small, exceptional batches that are higher in quality by definition with rare, unusual ingredients or composition.”

There is also a sentimental value attached to artisanal products that adds to their appeal. Says Mari Tuttle, owner (aka the Brownie Babe) of Mari’s New York, based in New York, NY, “In a world filled with mass-produced, machined foods, knowing that there’s someone gently stirring a bowl of melted chocolate is very comforting.” Mari’s makes all-natural, two-bite brownies in a variety of flavors including Classic, Caramel Sea Salt, Thai Coffee and more, using premium dark chocolate, grade AA butter and Madagascar bourbon vanilla extract.

It’s true. Which is more appealing: a generic loaf of bread mixed up by cold stainless steel in a nameless, faceless factory with the word “gourmet” plastered on at the last moment; or, a unique loaf of bread that has been hand kneaded, prepared and cared for by an artisan chef using an old family recipe?

For example, Dolce Nonna of Whitestone, NY produces a line of all-natural, artisanal food products made from 100-year-old Italian recipes with high-quality extra-virgin olive oils, premium spices and fresh produce. Such product offerings include Agri-Dolce Peppers, Marinated String Beans and Marinated Eggplant that can be eaten right out of the jar. Wendy M. Civale, founder and principal of Dolce Nonna, says, “Artisanal foods are extremely popular right now because consumers are starting to move away from mass-produced foods full of citric acid and preservatives.”

Adding to the idea of the sentimental connection to food is Greg Hinson, founder of O Olive Oil, Petaluma, CA: “We find that our consumers tend to respond better to descriptive words that are true to our products and to our production processes and that also resonate with their own values (e.g., local, barrel-aged, sustainable, hand-crafted, organic, pesticide and herbicide free,



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Food safety also plays a role in the popularity of artisanal products. Fernandes says, “The term ‘artisan’ is especially popular right now because the consumer is looking for products for which they can identify the source.” In the mind of the consumer, artisanal signifies product roots, she continues, implying that the food has local traceability and was made with particular care.

“With strong feelings about misrepresentation of products in advertising and packaging claims, individual products must stand up to scrutiny,” says Simon Wood, global marketing director for Alili Morocco, New York, NY. “There is a perceived contradiction when a mass corporate brand uses the word gourmet to convey superior quality,” he continues. Retailers would do well to research their gourmet and artisanal products to ensure authenticity. For shoppers, says Wood, authenticity is a more important attribute than any catch phrase.

Fine Foods and Finances

The market climate has been difficult given the financial restrictions many have felt over the past few years. Retailers and consumers alike are struggling. How can retailers help their customers justify spending a little extra on fancy cheese when they need to save for their kids’ college education?

“Consumers are watching their wallets, no doubt. But, that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re depriving themselves of the good things in life,” says Hamman. “It might be the difference between splurging on a restaurant meal versus purchasing special ingredients for a memorable meal at home.” Savvy retailers will be sure to accentuate that difference, he says.

“People still go to dinner parties, celebrate birthdays, get married, sometimes just need a treat, and our product fits those life events,” assures Tuttle. “If anything, we’ve seen an upturn in business because

we offer a very gift-able item at a very reasonable price.” Retailers can add something extra to their stores by setting up a special gift section with gourmet products already in gift packaging, or by offering a gift basket service to create unique gifts for customers.

Retailers should also be proactive about explaining any price premiums their gourmet and specialty items may have to ensure that this is not a barrier with customers. Civale says: “Retailers shouldn’t assume that a consumer is aware of the reasons why a product costs more.” To some people, a price may just seem higher for no apparent reason. Be open and active in explaining the reasons why a price increase is justified for certain gourmet or artisanal products in terms of a product being imported, containing rare ingredients, a patented recipe or cooking process and so on.

For example, say the Monroes of FungusAmongUs, their truffle products are so flavorful they really go a long way. Also, they say, “Our dried mushroom line is an ingredient line and can be used multiple times and [products] have a long shelf life. All of

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FungusAmongUs' products are certified organic and/or all natural, including organic shiitake, reishi and maitake."

Retailers might also focus on the health benefits of products, as part of the added value in their products. Says Alberto Carli of Rigoni di Asiago S.p.A., maker of Fiordifrutta, an organic fruit spread from Italy with no sugar added, "Our strategy is telling the people why it is better to spend a dollar more now than hundreds 20 years from now on medicine because of obesity and cholesterol problems. Many of the Fiordifrutta products are low on the glycemic index, with studies demonstrating their suggested use for diabetics, says Carli. The company also offers organic raw honey and Nocciolata, an organic hazelnut spread with the same heart-health benefits as olive oil.

Overall, Fernandes says, "I believe the average consumer is willing to pay extra to know that extra attention went into their gourmet product." Stonehouse 27's line of premium cooking sauces are inspired by Fernandes' Portuguese and British Indian heritage, offering homestyle flavors of Cashews and Cream (Hot and Mild), Tomato and Chilies (Medium), Cilantro and Coconut (Mild), Tamarind and Garlic (Mild), and Dates and Tamarind (Hot and Sweet). The sauces are all natural, low sodium, vegetarian/vegan, gluten free and use agave nectar instead of refined sugars, says Fernandes.



And despite the economy, Domonic Biggi, executive vice president of Beaverton Foods, Inc., Beaverton, OR, believes there is still a "significant market" for gourmet foods. He notes that the company experienced sales growth in 2009 compared to 2008, and believed it is an "indication of a growing demand for higher quality, great tasting foods." Beaverton Foods offers specialty condiments for retail, foodservice, industrial and co-pack customers including its recently launched all-natural Beaver brand Gourmet Ketchup with Honey Mustard and its Organic Inglehoffer Mustards, which have seen steady growth over the past year, says Biggi.

Schraeder confirms: "Gourmet sales in some categories are rising partly because a special chocolate or cheese is more cost-effective than big ticket purchases."

From Here to There, Gourmet Is Everywhere

Many gourmet companies bank on the rare and unique qualities of offering imported products. However, these companies face their own distinct set of challenges. "Increasingly our consumers are doing their homework in terms of healthfulness, safety, sustainability and impact on the environment. It would be nearly impossible for us to vouch for our products if any of these aspects were not domestic. And, this is increasingly of paramount importance to our particular consumer demographic," says Hinson.



The economic situation, too, is magnified for importers. Hamman adds, "Currency fluctuations are always part of food imports and can present challenges. Regardless, imported food will continue to make up a large portion of the gourmet



market as more and more Americans crave products from around the world.” Hamman Marketing Associates works with clients overseas who wish to introduce their products to U.S. consumers, such as 100% Tunisian Olive Oil, which offers

an organic extra virgin olive oil, among other varieties.

Guy Berthiaume, general manager for Au Printemps Gourmet of Prevost, Quebec, Canada, says although the company has seen growth over the past year, “Buyers are still conservative in their purchasing levels, keeping lower inventory levels and re-ordering more often. Marketing programs now have to take this dynamic into account.” The Brickstone Fine Food product line from the company includes tapenades, olive oil, cheese toppers, onion confit, chutneys, jellies, condiments, sauces, marinades, gourmet mustards and more. The line will be available in the United States this fall.

Transportation and carbon footprint are also of concern to importers. Wood of Ailili Morocco says, “The cost of transportation and a volatile currency exchange is a vulnerability impossible for a producer/importer such as Ailili Morocco to escape. Historically, things have worked out when considered over a, say, 24-month period—but there are often surprises from Mother Nature to keep us all appreciative of what we have.” Ailili Morocco offers Organic Olive Oil and Argan Oil, and Lavender Flower, Jujube and Carob Seed Honey from the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, among their range of other gourmet products such as cheese. “In today’s world with access to travel, ease of communications and cultural diversity on home soil, our palates are changing and becoming more adventurous,” says Wood, confirming consumers’ desires for exotic flavors and products.

Imported ingredients and products can certainly offer the distinct characteristics of a particular region. But domestic gourmet items also have their own appeal. Civale says, “The benefits of buying domestic items are that they are cheaper, often fresher, and we should be supporting local foods artisans and local farmers any chance we get.”

Many also believe that products do not have to originate from exotic places to be specialty or add a little international flair to their meals. According to Nielsen-Massey Vanilla’s Web site, its Orange Blossom Water can be used to create Persian, Arabic, Indian and Turkish dishes, and its Rose Water adds delicate floral notes to Middle Eastern, Indian and Greek foods such as baklava or rice, and puddings. The company also offers a variety of specialty vanilla extracts, powders, beans, pastes and blends. All of the company’s products are certified kosher and gluten free and are free of preservatives and artificial ingredients.

Food traceability and safety are key issues when it comes to imported versus domestic. “A good example is our three California balsamic vinegars,” says Hinson of O Olive Oil. “Our own consumers became alarmed upon hearing reports of unacceptable lead content found in European balsamic vinegar. They demanded to know where our products come from, down to the land where the grapes were produced. We discovered that we could not be responsive to their growing concerns unless we made these vinegars ourselves, under our own vigilance, and to our own rigorous standards. Here, we know the land, the farmers, the farming practices. The result is balsamic vinegars that not only meet, but exceed 30-times over the rigorous standards established by California’s Proposition 65 for lead in



consumer products.” The company also produces a variety of organic citrus-crushed olive oils in flavors such as Meyer lemon, blood orange, clementine, jalapeño lime, ruby grapefruit and Tahitian lime.

Another California company, Sierra Nevada Cheese, produces artisan cheese and fine dairy foods made from local Northern California milk and cream with a synthetic hormone- and antibiotic-free guarantee. Product offerings include organic European-style butter, several varieties of organic cheese and the new Capretta Goat Yogurts and Bella Capra Goat Jack Wedges.

Food safety and standard certifications, however, may not be as much of a concern for those who do their research on international companies. In many cases, importers go the extra mile to ensure their products are accepted worldwide. Rigoni di Asiago, for example, says Carli, is certified under several U.S. programs such as the Star-Kosher Program and the USDA’s National Organic Program, among several other international certifications.**WF**

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