

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

## Finding Comfort in the Familiar

Driven by an ailing economy, cooking and eating at home are back on the front burner. Moreover, with 96% of consumers believing that eating at home is healthier than eating out, according to the Food Marketing Institute's (FMI) *2008 Shopping for Health* report, this trend may well be here to stay.

In 2008, 242 meals per person were prepared and eaten at home—up from 235 in 2006 and fast approaching the 25-year high of 249 meals in 1992, according to the NPD Group's *Eating Patterns in America 2008*. FMI's *U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends 2008* reports that 82% of shoppers ate a home-cooked meal 3+ times per week last year, up from 75% two years ago. More importantly, half (53%) of consumers are cooking from scratch more frequently than six months ago, states Information Resources Inc. (IRI) in its special report, *Competing in a Transforming Economy 2008*. With Gallup's *2007 Dinner Survey* reporting that in 2007, 57% cooked last night's weekday dinner mainly from scratch with fresh ingredients, that's a significant increase.

Cooking at home is driving an increased demand for meal components. IRI's report cites significant sales increases for processed frozen poultry, rice, breakfast meats, instant potatoes, frozen plain vegetables, refrigerated/frozen side dishes, spices/seasonings, shortening/oils, soups, and Italian sauces.

According to the Hartman Group's *Reimagining Convenience Foods* report, Mexican, regional Italian, uniquely seasoned/marinated meat, Spanish foods, Japanese, New Orleans/Creole, Greek, Thai, and tapas/small plates are among the foods consumers would most like to enjoy at home.

During economic downturns, consumers traditionally have opted for more-familiar comfort foods, and this time is no exception. Technomic's December 2008 *American Express Market Brief* reported that 46% of

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consumers planned to eat more comfort foods in 2009. But with Schneider Associates' *Most Memorable New Product Launch Survey* revealing that three out of the five most-remembered new products of 2008 offer a new twist on familiar foods/drinks, they'll need a flavor upgrade. (*Bud Light Lime, McDonald's Southern Style Chicken Biscuit & Sandwich, and Kraft Mac & Cheese Crackers* are the products with the link to the familiar; they placed just behind *Wii Fit* and *iPod Touch*.)

American Culinary Federation chefs in the National Restaurant Assn.'s (NRA) *What's Hot?* survey, named old-fashioned braising, smoking, searing/sautéing, and grilling among the top food

preparation trends for 2009. Slow-cooked food was named the fifth-hottest culinary theme. Kabobs, dinner sausage, and pot roast/prime rib sandwiches are other returning favorites.

For the first time since the early 1990s, brown bagging is back in vogue, with 8.5 million adults carrying their lunch in 2008, according to NPD. This time, however, 60% of lunches did not contain a homemade item.

Booz & Co. reported that the incidence of home entertaining jumped 27% over

fat; light/low-calorie; and low-cholesterol. According to The Nielsen Co., sales of foods with a reduced-fat/fat-free claim reached \$46 billion for the year ended 4/19/08, up 12%; light/low-calorie product sales were \$17 billion, up 6%; and low-cholesterol food sales were \$10 billion, up 7%. Stouffer's *Lean Cuisine*, with sales of \$1.2 billion, has enjoyed double-digit growth for the past two years, according to The Nielsen Co.

Those 50+ are also driving a return to nutrients that they have long believed will help

2007. Technomic's September 2008 *POP: Parties Off-Premise* found that one in three adults ordered meals or platters for meetings, parties, and social occasions at least once a month. NRA's *2009 Forecast* reports that 58% of restaurant operators expect more catering business in 2009. High-end appetizers from the 1970s and 1980s (think hot dogs in blankets, rumaki, and mini-quiches) are considered a "high potential" category for 2009 by IRI.

What's old is new again in the healthy foods market, as well. With eight in 10 consumers taking some action to manage their weight in 2008, consumers are returning to tried and true food approaches, including low-fat or reduced-

with specific health conditions, regardless of the scientific support for their beliefs. Vitamin E for heart health, vitamin A and beta carotene for vision, vitamin A and D for skin, and vitamin B-12 for energy are among the comeback nutrients.

Lastly, with the low-carb movement back in perspective and boomers' healthy eating focused on a balanced plate, breads, rolls, and biscuits are back in vogue. Gallup's *Dinner Survey* reports that 33% of meal preparers served dinner with bread on weekends; 29% did so on weekdays. **FT**



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