

by A. Elizabeth Sloan

Predicting Pasta's Potential

It appears the stars are aligning for the pasta industry. Consumers are cooking at home on average 5.1 nights per week, according to the Food Marketing Institute's (FMI) 2015 *Power of Meat* report. And according to Multi-sponsor Surveys' 2014 *Gallup Study of Dinner*, 71% of meal preparers served pasta one or more times weekly.

FMI reports that 36% of shoppers are preparing more pasta, soup, and casseroles versus five years ago; 28% are preparing more ethnic foods and 26%, more stir fries, often accompanied by Asian noodles. Italian remains America's favorite ethnic cuisine, eaten by 72% of shoppers, according to FMI's 2014 *U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends* report. One in five gourmet retailers predict a new wave of interest in Italian fare, according to the Specialty Food Assoc.'s *State of the Specialty Food Industry* 2014 report.

Flavored pastas that eliminate the need for expensive spices and lend themselves to lighter preparations, sides dishes, or salads will find a welcoming market.

Six in 10 adults buy dry macaroni and cheese; 45%, dry pasta meals/sides; 28%, frozen pasta; and 25%, refrigerated pasta, per Mintel's *Dry Pasta, Rice and Noodles—U.S.*, a 2014 report. Low-income households (annual incomes of \$35,000 or less)—the heaviest users of pasta—are projected to account for 51% of U.S. households by 2020.

But despite these strong growth drivers, sales of dry pasta fell 1.5% for the year ended June 15, 2014, and frozen pasta sales were down 0.2%. Sales of refrigerated pasta jumped 5%, however, per Information Resources Inc.

Moreover, new pasta menu additions in restaurants were also flat, according to Technomic's 2013 *Starters, Small Plates & Sides Consumer Trend Report*. Mintel reports

that use of pasta products has fallen off among those aged 55-plus.

With adults eating alone on 47% of all eating occasions and 15% of eating occasions involving eating the food within an hour of purchase, according to the Hartman Group's 2013 *Modern Eating Report*, portability, single-serve, and ready-to-eat are "must-have" pasta attributes.

The explosive take-from-home trend, well targeted by Hormel's shelf-stable microwavable pasta meals (e.g., *Compleats' Chicken Marinara*) and products such as *Annie's Real Aged Cheddar Mac & Cheese Mini Meal Kit* for kids, are other untapped opportunities. Ethnic-inspired, gourmet, whole grain, and teriyaki items (e.g., noodles) are among the hot culinary trends for kids' meals in 2015, per the National Restaurant Assoc.'s (NRA) 2014 *What's Hot?* survey.

Sales of dry gourmet pasta jumped 8.6% over the past two years, and refrigerated pasta was up 17.5%, according to the Specialty Foods Assoc. report. Gourmet products accounted for 22% of dry pasta category sales in 2014.

With Greece, Sweden, Peru, Russia, Germany, and Argentina among the top pasta-consuming countries, importing unique pastas and recipes from around the world is a very big idea. Asian and ramen noodles are among the fastest-growing hot culinary trends for 2015, with interest up 5% versus 2014, explains NRA.

Flavored pastas that eliminate the need for expensive spices and lend themselves to lighter preparations (e.g., simply adding oil), sides dishes, or salads will find a welcoming

market. Tomato-basil-garlic, sweet potato, pesto-parmesan, and peanut-ginger-teriyaki are among the favorite pasta/noodle flavors in restaurants; olive, sweet red pepper, spicy peanut, Cajun, and clam are among the fastest-emerging pasta sauces, per Technomic's 2013 *Flavor Consumer Trend Report*.

While some pasta makers are touting gluten-free, it is likely the skyrocketing interest in unique, specialty, and ancient grains/flours that will grab pasta users' attention. Non-wheat noodles/pasta (e.g., quinoa, rice, or buckwheat) top the list of hot side dish trends for 2015. Non-wheat flours (e.g., peanut, millet, barley, and rice) rank third among the hot culinary ingredient trends; ethnic flours (e.g., fufu, teff, and cassava/yucca) are seventh.

According to FMI's report, 24% of shoppers now opt for healthier pasta, led by whole grain. With 69% of consumers making an effort to buy fortified foods, according to the 2014 *Gallup Study of Nutrient Knowledge & Consumption*, it makes sense for product developers to add nutrients to pasta. Ronzoni positions its Smart Taste pasta as an "excellent source of fiber, calcium, and vitamin D."

With 76% of U.S. households preparing meat alternative meals for dinner, protein-fortified pasta has very high potential. *Barilla Plus* is described as "a good source of protein, fiber, and ALA omega-3." Mueller's *Hidden Veggie Spaghetti* delivers a full serving of vegetables per 4 oz portion. While white pasta is among the foods that 78% of consumers cut out when trying to maintain a low-carb diet, only 21% eliminate whole grain pasta, according to the 2014 *Low Carb/High Protein Survey* from HealthFocus. In 2014, 22% of shoppers looked for low carb on the label, down 19% from 2011, per FMI. **FT**



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