



Cheese Market News

Cheesemakers innovate with new snack shapes, formats

By Trina La Sosa

MADISON, Wis. — Cheese companies are delivering new formats and shapes to meet consumer demand for portable and convenient snacking options in 2020. Single-serve cups, crispy cheeses, and formats like spread, string, stick, cube and curds continue to pop up at retailers across the nation.

“The traditional three-meals-a-day eating schedule is being replaced with and complemented by smaller and more frequent snacks,” says Brenda Bell, insights manager, Sargento Foods. “With this shift, consumers will continue to demand their snacks balance taste and nutrition, as well as convenience and portability to fit their busy lifestyles.”

Convenience will be a key factor among many growing cheese segments, especially in snacking. About 69% of U.S. adults say they snack in between meals at least once a week, and 30% say they replace meals with snacks once a week or more, according

to The Hartman Group research data provided by Dairy Management Inc. (DMI), which manages the national dairy checkoff program.

“Cheese remains a staple for cooking, but consumers are turning to cheese as a quick and enjoyable snack because it really fits that on-the-go mentality they have,” says Chad Galer, vice president of product research, DMI. “Where we’re seeing a lot of growth and changes among cheesemakers and converters is really in convenience, flavor and also in the offerings for shape and texture.”

For one company, cottage cheese is taking on a new shape, similar to that of an ice cream bar, as a grab-and-go refrigerated snack. Spēka brand has brought chocolate and caramel coated bars of cold cottage cheese to the United States through its importer and marketer, Baltic Marketing Inc., Montclair, New Jersey.

“The cottage cheese bar, but in a somewhat less nutritious form, has been a popular dairy staple of the Bal-

tics throughout the years,” says Anita Batarags, co-developer, Spēka. “Thus came the idea that, given the gradually rising trend toward cottage cheese among the U.S. consumer, coupled with the increasing surge of interest in high-protein, natural snacks, that we ourselves could jump onto improving and branding the cottage cheese bar for the U.S. consumer. We worked with the dairy producer to increase the protein, decrease the sugar content, and in conjunction with flavor companies here in New Jersey, provide a new and interesting flavor assortment.”

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U.S. dairy industry stakeholders laud Senate passage of USMCA

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate yesterday voted to ratify the United States-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement (USMCA) by a vote of 89-10. President Trump is expected to sign the agreement, which will replace the previous North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Canada has yet to ratify USMCA, but Mexico already has done so.

For dairy, USMCA preserves the Mexican market, eliminates Canada's Class 6 and 7 pricing program that allowed Canadian producers to undersell U.S. producers, increases market access to the Canadian market and strengthens provisions to protect common cheese names, stakeholders say. U.S. dairy exports to Mexico and Canada totaled more than \$2.1 billion in 2018, or roughly 40%

of total U.S. dairy exports, says the International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA).

“The new USMCA deal delivers peace of mind for our businesses, removing the handcuffs of uncertainty that have constrained business decisions over the past two years as the deal was negotiated,” says Michael Dykes, president and CEO, IDFA. “The USMCA deal is a major win that levels the playing field with our largest trading partners.”

The U.S. Dairy Export Council (USDEC) and National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) also cheered the Senate vote but urged U.S. officials to carefully monitor Canada and Mexico's USMCA commitments once the trade deal takes effect to ensure its provisions are enforced so the dairy industry

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U.S.-China trade agreement includes benefits for U.S. dairy

WASHINGTON — President Trump signed the first phase of a trade agreement between the United States and China during a signing ceremony Wednesday at the White House.

The agreement addresses structural barriers to trade and will support expansion of U.S. food and agriculture exports, according to statements released by the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR).

Under the phase one agreement, China has agreed to purchase and import on average at least \$40 billion of U.S. food, agricultural and seafood products annually for a total of at least \$80 billion over the next two years. On top of that, China will strive to import an additional \$5 billion per year over the next two years.

Regarding sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures, the parties agreed to not implement food safety regulations or require ac-

tions of the other party's regulatory authorities that are not science- and risk-based, and will only apply such regulations and actions to the extent necessary to protect human life or health. Additionally, the parties have agreed that China will improve SPS measures affecting a wide variety of products, which will facilitate exports of U.S. food and agricultural products to China.

Additionally, regarding geographical indications (GIs), China has agreed not to undermine market access for U.S. exports to China using trademarks and generic terms through any GI measures taken in connection with an international agreement, to use certain relevant factors when making determinations for genericness, and to not provide GI protection to individual components of multi-component terms if the individual component is generic.

The Consortium for Common Food Names (CCFN), together

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Since the Spēka Bar launched September 2019 at Natural Products Expo East in Maryland, the bars have become popular on the West Coast as refrigerated grab-and-go dairy snacks, Batarags says. On the East Coast, Spēka currently is in a smattering of coffee shops and natural products stores, and is under review in a number of large retail chains.

“The Spēka Bar is a healthy, all-natural sweet dairy selection to the person craving a late morning or midday snack,” Batarags says. “It pairs well with coffee and is a very viable coffee

shop or grab-and-go refrigerated snack that—with its combination of protein, fat and sugar—will provide lasting energy. Additionally, consumers will be pleased to find that with just 140-150 calories per 1.3-ounce bar, their urge to snack is happily satisfied.”

Made with milk sourced from Latvia and Estonia, the 1.3-ounce Spēka bars currently are sold in vanilla, Greek yogurt and salted caramel flavors.

While consumers might primarily think of Ricotta as an ingredient for cooking, a new format of Ricotta has been designed for snacking. RifRaf Ricotta Cups, Brooklyn, New York, has launched 4.6-ounce single-serve Ricotta cups with sweet and savory stir-in flavors.

“My co-founder, David Eisenman, was making lasagna one night, and he started snacking on the leftover Ricotta, when a light bulb when off,” says William Hickox, co-founder, RifRaf. “After some research and the realization that no one had made a snackable Ricotta cup, he shared the idea with me and our other co-founder, Chris Sojka, and we started putting the wheels in motion.”

Hickox says that initially RifRaf Ricotta cups were envisioned as a fruit-on-the-bottom format, but that ended up drawing moisture out of the cheese and creating a watery consistency. After revisiting the drawing board, he says they decided on the cup with a compartment for stir-in flavors

inspired by Greek yogurt packaging.

“Ricotta, with its high protein and a truly unique format, is the excitement people are looking for,” Hickox says. “Also, its neutral pallet sets the stage for both sweet and savory flavors, something yogurt has tried but has never been able to capture in that market.”

To develop RifRaf’s flavor profiles, Hickox says they tweaked the Ricotta recipes by adding different jams from the shelves and looking at top yogurt flavors.

“Yogurt consumers are some of the most adventurous in trying new flavors and brands,” Hickox says. “We are positioning our Ricotta cups to be a flavor-forward, indulgent snack for consumers who are looking for an adventurous alternative to their typical yogurt cups.”

The Ricotta cups are available in Meyer Lemon, Strawberry Balsamic, Wildflower Honey, Sundried Tomato and Serrano Pepper Honey flavors and sold in select Whole Foods and independent grocery stores throughout the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic Regions; Kings/Balducci’s in New Jersey; and Central Market in Texas.

“I think we will continue to see that trend of cottage cheese and Ricotta, really playing off that healthy halo of a good source of protein and low sugar, continuing to grow,” Galersays. “They are really affordable sources of protein that consumers continue to rediscover, and they pair well because they are mild, milky cheeses.”

Another growing snack trend is baked cheese crisps made from 100% cheese. Low in carbs and a source of protein, Cello Whisps Cheese Crisps from Schuman Cheese, Fairfield, New Jersey, offer bite-sized, crunchy cheese crisps in Asiago & Pepper Jack, Cheddar, Parmesan, Bacon BBQ and Tomato Basil flavors for snacking straight out of the bag.

Other formats of dehydrated cheeses include cheese bites resembling spherical pieces of the moon from Moon Cheese, Ferndale, Washington; cheese crisp bars, o-shaped crisps and cracker-like square crisps from Sonoma Creamery, Sonoma, California; and popped cheese bites in single-serve cups from Cheesebop B.V., Utrecht, Netherlands.

The cheese crisp category, while small, offers a new snacking option for consumers, and 100% natural cheese crisps volume sales in the United States have grown to 2.18 million pounds as of November 2019, from 1.28 million pounds in 2017 and 1.60 million pounds in 2018, according to IRI data provided by DMI.

According to Galer, snacking will continue to be driven by convenience, portability, single-serve packaging and bite-size shapes such as crisps, sticks, cubes and half circles.

“It’s paramount that cheese companies continue to innovate and stay on top of trends because consumer expectations, tastes and preferences are constantly changing,” Galer says. CMN

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