

Tracking product development trends

Alison Bower makes ice cream with a 2-quart batch maker in a store front in Chicago's Lincoln Square neighborhood. Flavors produced under her Ruth&Phils Gourmet Ice Cream brand include Mango Ginger Sorbet and Cream Cheese with Lemon Cake Ice Cream. She sells the products to restaurants and specialty stores mostly and

article about emerging ice cream artisans. They make ice cream by hand, sometimes with unique ingredients and flavors, but at other times in ways that reflect simple nostalgic traditions. Product developers want to tap into these kinds of trends, said Lucinda Wisniewski, vice-president of innovation and commercialization for the National Food Lab

Indulgence, simple label and enhanced are three trends to watch

also directly to consumers at farmers markets, and from the store during the fall and winter months.

"We are pushing the organic and local food angle, and seasonality," said the 31-year-old Chicago area native.

Ms. Bower has been in business for three years after a stint in California studying at culinary school and working. She said Chicago consumers now have a much different perspective on food than they did even five years ago thanks to trends like the growth of Whole Foods Markets, the proliferation of farmers markets, and a general heightened interest in food quality and food politics.

In July, while thousands of food and beverage industry personnel attended the I.F.T. 10, the Institute of Food Technologists' annual meeting and food exposition, *The Chicago Tribune* featured Ms. Bower and some of her contemporaries in an

(N.F.L.), Livermore, Calif. Ms. Wisniewski worked the N.F.L.'s booth at the I.F.T. show and heard directly from food manufacturers about the kinds of products they want to make and sell.

"It seems we are seeing some changes," Ms. Wisniewski said during a lunch break. "Coming out of the economy, companies are being a bit less frugal. Consumers are looking again for a little bit of indulgence. There is an interest in artisan and home-made types of ice cream, and old-fashioned flavors. Some have a homey dessert spin, like with yogurt - things like pineapple upside down cake (or) Boston cream pie."

While indulgence may be making a comeback, it is a gradual progression.

"It is tempered," said Ms. Wisniewski. "The healthy overlay is persistent. So there is some crossover of the two, with things like portion control — smaller portions but with



heightened indulgence. It's kind of the best of both worlds."


Dairy product innovation

Helping food and beverage manufacturers discover new ways to use dairy ingredients in a range of product applications was the focus of the U.S. Ingredients program which exhibited at the I.F.T. Presented by the U.S. Dairy Export Council, which is a division of Dairy Management Inc., the program offered recent research demonstrating how U.S. dairy ingredients may contribute to improved taste, functionality and nutritional benefits that meet consumer demands.

The exhibit included five prototypes (see "I.F.T. innovation," this issue, Page 52) including a Honey Lavender Soothie, which is described as a soothing smoothie, and High Protein Breakfast Bits made with cheese and fortified with whey protein.

Plenty of new products already in the market reflect emerging trends in product development. Consumer data and analysis specialist Mintel International Ltd., Chicago, produces periodic reports on several dairy segments, including ice cream and frozen desserts. In a recent report, Mintel said the frozen yogurt comeback should continue and frozen novelties geared to dieters is a trend.

In a similar report on yogurt, Mintel said the category will



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continue to be one of the most important opportunities in dairy. Sales of yogurt and yogurt drinks grew a healthy 32% from 2004-09, reaching nearly \$4.1 billion in food, drug stores and mass merchandisers, the report stated. Mintel forecasts yogurt sales growth of 28% through 2014 with sales topping \$5 billion in 2014.

The report said organic is a key attribute for yogurt: The "organic" designation helped products in the segment achieve significant gains in distribution as many grocery retailers stock organic products in separate sections (away from the general ice cream and frozen novelties aisle), doubling an organic product's presence in the store. Additionally, with the organic designation, brands expanded to natural retailers, such as Whole Foods, as well.

Natural and simple

In general, consumers are looking for foods that are more

natural, with a simpler list of ingredients, Ms. Wisniewski said. Häagen-Dazs Five, a line of ice creams, each with no more than five ingredients on its label, is a good example.

"That's really the gold standard, Ms. Wisniewski said. "People come to us and say 'How do I do that?' But it is not easy to do if you still want to have longer shelf life.

"People are now asking us to advise them on alternative process technologies. But it's a long way to go. It's a going to be a while before those technologies are readily used by the industry."

Overall, Ms. Wisniewski said she believes there is even a move away from functional foods that are fortified with functions that would not naturally be found in that kind of food.

"We have moved a little bit from functional foods as the goal, maybe toward enhanced foods, where there are more of

the things that are naturally in the products," she said. "I think the next move will be from enhanced foods to whole foods."

The N.F.L. provides a variety of consulting services to help food companies bring products to market and maintain food quality and safety. Those clients know that it is more important than ever to pay attention to consumer trends and product development concerns, Ms. Wisniewski said. It's not always easy to determine which trends will become permanent considerations.

"The companies I've spoken with still want the new exotic fruits and juices," she said. "That seemed like a fad, but there is still a lot of steam behind that trend, with new fruits like acerola berry, and the yumberry."

Meanwhile, back in the neighborhoods in Chicago, Ms. Bower said the local food movement continues to play a key role in her success. She also said that as an innovator, she feels fortunate consumers are more willing to try different flavor combinations.

"I like putting together different flavors to see what will happen," she said. "We recently made a sorbet with pale ale and apricots. It was made with a beer that I usually wouldn't enjoy, but we put it together and it was really nice." DEN

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