



As the economy turns down, the cheese category responds with a slew of new products that bring big and bold flavor and texture back into the kitchen and into home-cooked meals.

■ **Marina Mayer** *Executive Editor*

It used to be that consumers would go out to eat to obtain the cheese-flavored spark in their meal. Whether it be spicy shredded Mozzarella over a salad or a fresh slice of cheese on a burger, more and more consumers were heading to restaurants to curb that zesty cheese craving.

But as the economy took a nosedive, it provided opportunities for the cheese market to carve out a bigger and bolder position in the dairy industry. That's why many of today's cheese producers are creating items that deliver robust flavorings, zesty spices, unusual textures and layers upon layers of taste — all factors in helping consumers return to the kitchen to prepare those high-quality home-cooked meals.

"Cheese continues to be one of America's favorite dairy forms," says Erin Price, marketing director, consumer products division for **Sargento Foods Inc.** "The natural cheese snacks category in particular has been growing. It provides the flavor variety and high protein consumers want with the calcium they need for a satisfying snack between meals."

As a result, the Plymouth, Wis.-based processor launched Sargento Natural Blends, a new line of natural snack-and-sliced cheese options, available in Cheddar-Mozzarella and

Provolone-Mozzarella cheese sticks, Cheddar-Mozzarella, Provolone-Mozzarella and Colby-Pepper Jack deli-style slices and ChefStyle Shredded Pepper Jack and Shredded Extra Sharp Cheddar cheeses.

New Flavors and Blends on the Cheeseboard

Light Spinach & Artichoke Spreadable Cheese

by Alouette Cheese USA

Salsa Asiago

by Sartori Cheese

Marionberry (with cranberries and hazelnuts)

by Rising Sun Farms

Shredded Pepper Jack

by Sargento

Premium Reserve Cheddar

by Cabot Creamery Cooperative

The Power of Protein

By communicating the protein content of cheese to consumers, processors can position their products as meatless alternatives.

By Miriam Erickson Brown



We all want to be liked, but some of us don't have to try very hard. Take cheese, for example; in recent research, consumers told us they chose cheese because they like the way it tastes. But, I think consumers might choose cheese even more often if they knew what a great source of protein it is, especially since

54% of consumers are trying to get more protein in their diets and eat less meat (one in four adults have cut back on meat consumption for health reasons).

Research shows that one-fourth of meat reducers are already consuming more dairy, mainly because they know dairy gives them healthy bones. The rest of those meat reducers are consuming the same amount of dairy. (I have to pause here and note that opportunities like this rarely come around for dairy).

Continued on page 42

Consumers do not currently see dairy products as a top source of protein. The top menu choices for meatless meal proteins are tofu, eggs and lentils. No wonder the greatest challenges for someone reducing meat in his or her diet are lack of variety, cravings and poor nutrition. Dairy's relevance in an environment like this is mind-blowing. Cheese not only tastes great, but also is a good source of high-quality protein. Think about what an effect we could have by collaborating as an industry to convey more protein messaging for cheese, cottage cheese, milk and yogurt, giving us an advantage in a marketplace that is placing increasing value on protein and multiple nutrient content. In fact, 47% of consumers find the message "good source of protein" very important on product labels.

The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, which is funded by the dairy checkoff, created and tested protein messages across multiple dairy categories, including cheese. All this cool stuff can be accessed on www.USDAiry.com/hw.

Take a look at a couple of the top-rated cheese messages (when combining purchase motivation and believability scores):

- Cheese is more than just calcium; it also provides protein your body needs to help stay healthy.
- Cheese helps curb hunger with a diet higher in protein. Cheese is a good source of high-quality protein.
- Your body uses protein all day long. Try cheese, a good source of protein, to help you get your protein throughout the day.

According to my colleague Gwen Bargetzi, marketing director at Hilmar Ingredients and a member of the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy Health and Wellness Committee, "this particular nutri-

ent has never been as top of mind for the average consumer or offered as much potential for dairy as it does today. Highlighting dairy protein and its functional and health benefits will help grab the attention of consumers. To fully leverage this trend and show that dairy is irreplaceable in our diet, better awareness of dairy products' inherent high-quality protein is a must."

You don't have to use our exact lingo – we know the marketing brains will want to make them their own, based on their company's strategies – but these messages serve as a great foundation. The point is, by communicating the protein nutrition and the variety of other benefits of dairy to consumers, our products become a simple meatless solution in both the nutrition and taste categories. At the risk of sounding cheesy, bring it on. ■

Miriam Erickson Brown is the Health and Wellness committee chair for Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, Rosemont, Ill, and the president/CEO of Anderson Erickson Dairy, Des Moines, Iowa.

■ Columbia Cheese imports 15-pound wheels of Scharfe Maxx from Switzerland. The wheel receives a wash with brine made of herb, wine and spices that makes the rind pungent.



Protein: An Emerging Opportunity

Despite increasing competition, the industry can capitalize on dairy's equity beyond calcium and bone health to meet evolving consumer needs.

By Barb O'Brien

The dairy industry's long investment in nutrition and consumer research is paying dividends. Dairy is being recognized for its unique nutrient package and health benefits among the nutrition community. When it comes to the consumer audience, an incredible opportunity exists for the industry to promote its current and future product offerings. That's why the time is now to promote dairy's multiple nutrients and the physical and emotional benefits these products bring consumers of all ages.

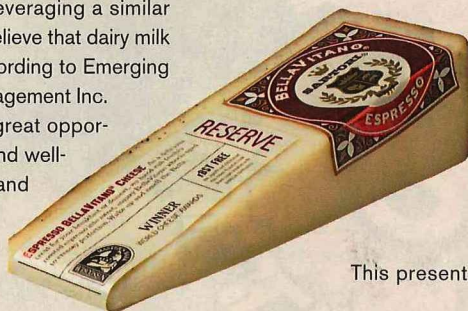
The dairy industry has long leveraged its superior nutrient package, but in the past decade, non-dairy products have been starting to take ownership in this space. Dairy alternatives, juice, water and other snack foods are taking aim at dairy by leveraging a similar nutrient story. In fact, nearly half of adults now believe that dairy milk and dairy alternatives are equally nutritious, according to Emerging Diets Research, 2010, conducted by Dairy Management Inc.

Today's consumer environment presents a great opportunity for dairy, with its strong focus on health and wellness. Dairy's story can help to win the health and wellness battle – it has a superior nutrient package, science supports its value and research shows consumers believe in its benefits.

Despite increasing competition, the industry can capitalize on dairy's equity beyond calcium and bone health to meet evolving consumer needs. In fact, protein is taking center stage as a nutrient of importance, with more than half of consumers looking to include more protein in their diet (which shows slight growth over previous years), according to research findings from the NPD Group's Dieting Monitoring Service, 2008.

Consumers have high unaided awareness of the benefits of protein, in general (the only nutrient they show more knowledge of is calcium). They perceive protein as a way to help with the following:

- Build and maintain muscle
- Recovery of muscle after exercise
- Achieve sustained energy
- Suppress hunger
- Slow muscle loss with aging
- Provide an alternate protein source for those seeking meatless meals



This presents an emerging opportunity for dairy
Continued on page 46

to leverage its total nutrient package with emphasis on protein content as a way to help stand ahead of the competition. But, the industry will need to help consumers connect protein and dairy first. Although research from NHANES 2003-2006 (ages 2-plus years) shows dairy already provides nearly 20% of consumers' protein consumption per day (with milk leading and cheese a close second), today's consumers give dairy credit for calcium and little else.

While dairy proteins are top-quality, fewer than one in five adults list protein as a nutrient present in cheese. The percentage is even less for milk and yogurt, as indicated in the 2009 NRF Benchmark Quantitative study.

Raising the profile of dairy's protein benefits is especially important given the health-driven meat-reducing trend. The first step is to reframe dairy's story in the marketplace by communicating the presence of multiple nutrients. Research shows that today's meat-reducing consumers do not recognize the multiple nutrient benefits of dairy as a key driver in choosing more dairy products.

To help motivate all consumers to choose more dairy, linking nutrients to specific benefits creates a powerful opportunity. The dairy industry can couple nutrition science in the benefit areas mentioned above to better ladder to how dairy can help fulfill these needs. The Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, which is funded by the dairy checkoff, created and tested protein messages in multiple benefit areas across multiple dairy categories. These messages offer brands foundational statements that can be customized based on business goals and marketing strategies. By using core messages as a base, brands will contribute to building awareness of dairy's important protein benefits and further amplify dairy as a food group rich in nutrients to meet many health and wellness needs.

The industry can access a library of protein messages as well as consumer insight research to help guide marketing and communications of dairy protein at www.USDairy.com/hw. ■

Barb O'Brien is the president of the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, Rosemont, Ill.