

# CHEESE MARKET NEWS®

The Weekly Newspaper Of The Nation's Cheese And Dairy/Deli Business

## Pepper cheeses enjoy growth with trends in spicier foods

By Rena Archwamety

**MADISON, Wis.** — For cheese eaters and diners who like it hot, the spicy options are growing. Restaurant chains and cheesemakers have taken note of Americans' more adventurous palates.

Menu items increasingly are featuring hot peppers and Pepper Jack cheeses, and pepper cheeses themselves are growing in variety and heat index.

Cabot Cheese's director of marketing, Amy Levine, says Cabot has seen its spiciest cheese, Habanero Cheddar, appeal to a broader and broader audience as the interest in hot foods is growing to a larger

population. She says certain markets, such as Texas and Florida, tend to consume more peppers in their cheese. Cities with strong sales of hot pepper cheese include Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Little Rock, Dallas, New Orleans and Minneapolis, she adds.

Millennials most enjoy spicy food, and "spicy" is the second-leading flavor mentioned on U.S. menus (behind garlic), with room for growth, according to an August report, "Innovation on the Menu: Flavor Trends" from market research company Mintel. The Mintel report also indicates that spicy-flavored items on restaurant menus grew 13 percent between the first quarter of 2009 and the first quarter of 2012, increasing every year.

This summer Chili's debuted six spicy "Pick-a-Pepper" entrees. Red Robin Gourmet Burgers Inc. introduced limited-time "Fiery Ghost" and "Cry Baby" styles to its burger upgrade options, which include pepper jack cheeses, spicy sauces and the super-spicy ghost pepper.

"The culinary world has really embraced the chile pepper in a number of ways across the American dining landscape,"

says Dave Woolley, executive chef, Red Robin.

### • Staple and variety

The cheese world also has embraced the hot pepper. Though Pepper Jack cheeses started emerging in the 1970s, this variety recently has become more of a staple than just specialty. Cheesemakers continue to experiment with different combinations, from sweet papadews to habanero and even ghost pepper cheeses that test the limits of spice tolerance.

Rumiano Cheese Co., Crescent City, Calif., first started making Pepper Jack in the early 1980s after brothers Baird and John Rumiano took over the company as third-generation owners. They use the same Monterey Jack the company has been producing for 91 years to create Jalapeno Pepper Jack, Habanero Jack, and Chipotle and Mango Habanero varieties. Rumiano's Organic Pepper Jack also is popular in natural food stores across the country, and its jalapeno habanero slices are used by a sandwich chain.

John Rumiano, the company's vice president, explains how he and his brother created their first batch of Pepper Jack.

"My brother Baird went down to Safeway and bought a

jar of pimentos and some whole canned jalapenos, chopped them up and put them in the cheese," he says.

After searching for the best quality peppers and combinations, the company now uses red bell peppers and Jalapenos sourced from Mexico in its award-winning Pepper Jack.

"It's become a staple over the years," Rumiano says. "It used to be Cheddar, Monterey Jack and Swiss. Now Pepper Jack is right up there."

John Jaeggi, coordinator for the Cheese Industry and Applications Program at the Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research, says most companies that make cheese now have some sort of pepper cheese in their product offerings. Monterey Jack tends to be the preferred base for pepper cheeses because as a stirred-curd cheese, it is easier to add and evenly distribute the peppers on the open curd table before they are pressed in with the cheese.

"With Muenster and Havarti, it's a little more of a challenge," Jaeggi says. "Those cheeses are pumped from a vat and the curd and whey mix onto the table. When you add peppers, you don't want a lot

Turn to PEPPER, page 16 ⇨

# PEPPER

Continued from page 1

of contamination in the whey stream.”

However, Jaeggi says Jalapeno Muenster and Havarti varieties are not uncommon, and he even has seen habanero peppers in aged Parmesan, where the heat combines well with the sweet, fruity Parmesan. He says peppers also have been pressed on the outside of cheeses or layered in the middle by small, farmstead cheesemakers.

Decatur Dairy Inc., Brodhead, Wis., makes Pepper Havarti, Pepper Muenster, Pepper Brick and a Farmers cheese with sweet and hot peppers. Cheesemaker Steve Stettler says the company's pepper cheese foodservice line is growing, and he has seen more demand for Pepper Havarti and Pepper Muenster on the retail side. He estimates Decatur Dairy now makes 4,000-5,000 pounds of pepper cheeses a week, while five years ago the company made only 4,000 pounds every two months.

A lot of the products Decatur Dairy makes are customer-driven, Stettler says, adding that the adventurous consumer

has been good for the dairy industry.

“Most of the pepper cheese we make is customer-driven,” he says. “We can use jalapeno, habanero, sweet and hot — there are all kinds of peppers available out there, and everyone has their own degree. We can change the variety and look, depending on what people want — more red than green or green than red — we can mix and match peppers.”

## • Fired-up competition

Decatur Dairy won best of class for its Pepper Havarti in the Pepper Flavored Cheeses (natural styles other than Cheddar, Colby and Jack) category at this year's World Championship Cheese Contest. Decatur's Pepper Havarti also was selected as one of the top 16 finalists among the contest's 2,504 entries from 24 countries.

“The pepper class is a big win. It's a huge class. You can put pepper in anything, and everyone seems to be doing a pepper cheese,” Stettler says. “You're going up against cheeses that are pretty artistically put together.”

Jaeggi, who was one of the judges for the pepper class at the World Championship Cheese Contest this year, says pepper cheese entries have grown quite a bit in recent years. The pepper cheese

classes were so big this year that the entries had to be split up between two or three judging teams.

When scoring pepper cheese in contests, Jaeggi says the first thing judges look at is an even distribution of peppers so there are not areas where there are big chunks or concentrations of pepper and others where there are none.

However, how a pepper cheese is scored in a contest is not always the same as what consumers want, Jaeggi says.

“Consumers want to taste them. As a judge, judges always want to make sure there is a balance of cheese flavor with condiment flavor,” he says. “If it's for the consumer, going for foodservice — like the Wendy's fast food chain's use of Pepper Jack, or Subway — for something like that you will want a lot of flavor. A lot of times the flavor will be volatile, flash up. They will want a large amount of pepper.”

Jaeggi adds that he thinks there is still room for more pepper cheese varieties and innovation.

“I think consumers are liking it more and more,” he says. “Combinations of peppers, habanero and jalapeno blends, peppadew which is lower in heat. The ghost pepper is coming on with more extreme high heat. You're seeing (peppers) in more cheeses.”

## • Bitten by the hot bug

Levine says Cabot's pepper cheeses are known for their bold flavors, and its Habanero Cheddar is one of the hottest pepper cheeses out there. She adds that Cabot has seen more men get excited about flavors like Habanero, and that this cheese goes well with tailgating and other activities.

“It's been a huge success for us,” she says of the Habanero Cheddar. “Sometimes when people sample it, they're a little surprised by how hot it is. It's pretty hot, but it's very popular. People love it.”

Levine adds that Cabot's Habanero Cheddar is the No. 1 selling pepper-flavored Cheddar in the United States, and it has won in hot cheese categories

at the Scovie Awards and Firey Food Challenge.

In addition to the Habanero Cheddar, Cabot makes a Chipotle Cheddar with a milder heat and smoky flavor, a Pepper Jack and Light Pepper Jack, and a Light Jalapeno Cheddar that won first in the lowfat flavored cheese class in last month's American Cheese Society contest.

The bold flavor of Cabot's pepper cheeses make them ideal for recipes, and many of the recipes on Cabot's website call for the pepper cheeses.

“They tend to go really nicely in a lot of different recipes, soups and salads,” Levine says. “We made a habanero mac and cheese, and a pepper jack mac and cheese. It gives more body, more robustness to recipes.”

The reduced-fat pepper cheeses are seen in quite a few of the recipes, helping to add more flavor and punch to healthier fare, Levine says.

Jaeggi notes that one thing that masks the heat of the hot peppers in cheeses is fat, so the lower the fat level of a cheese, the more intense the heat will be. This can work well when cheesemakers are looking to create a flavor profile in reduced-fat and lower-sodium cheeses.

“In the case of lower fat, lower sodium cheeses, people look at peppers and other condiments to offset the lack of salt flavor or salt in cheeses,” Jaeggi says. “It's a flavor perception outside of sodium. It won't take the place of sodium, but it helps with overall flavors.”

The appeal of spicy cheeses is spreading even to a younger set of consumers. Levine recalls a sampling event where a child came up to try a piece of Cabot's Habanero Cheddar.

“I was waiting for the tears, but he was all jazzed up and came back for more with his mom and dad,” she says.

“People are trying lots of different flavors and spices, and heat becomes just another part of that,” Levine adds. “I think consumers have been bitten by the hot bug.” **CMN**