

Cheese *whizzes*

Retailers and manufacturers are helping shoppers develop a taste for specialty cheeses with product samplings, promotions and educational opportunities.

BY CRAIG LEVITT

FROM AMERICAN AND ASIAGO TO SWISS AND ZAMORANO, there is a cheese for every age and every occasion. While consumers will always have their traditional favorites, over the past several years industry insiders say Americans have expanded their horizons by experimenting with a variety of specialty cheeses.

“As people start experimenting with cheese beyond a block of cheddar or the typical cheeses you think of from America, it has opened them up to more types,” says Mike Collins, marketing director for Swardlick Marketing Group, a Portland, Maine-based company charged with developing and executing the overall marketing campaign for The Cheeses of France, which promotes French imported cheeses in the U.S. “Even in grocery stores, when we first started a couple of years ago there were maybe four French cheeses. Now there are dozens. The first year we did sampling we sampled maybe 45 cheeses and last year we sampled more than 100. It’s really encouraging.”

Collins adds that as these cheeses gain popularity consumers continue to thirst for cheese knowledge, often looking towards retailers to provide the desired information. To meet these consumer needs it is becoming more and more important for retailers to either train their staffs to be prepared to answer these questions or display merchandising material at the cheese counter to

help guide consumers.

“When a consumer walks up to a cheese case or counter sometimes they are overwhelmed by what’s in there,” says Collins. “Retailers can do a lot by just making sure there are descriptions next to each one.” Along with descriptions, Collins suggests retailers provide ideas for cheese plates, recommendations for pairing cheeses with wines and beers and recipes that can be enhanced with specialty cheeses.

While The Cheeses of France doesn’t promote any particular brand of French cheese, it develops promotional samplings and advertisements intended to raise overall awareness and demand for French cheeses. Up until now, Collins says the main focus has been education and creating fromage plates.

“The new initiative for us this year is expanding the usage occasion beyond the fromage plate so we are going to be talking about cooking with fromage,” says Collins. “We are looking at new ways of showing how French cheese can upscale a number of different types of dishes and exploring different tastes and textures in cooking.”

Insiders say that while consumers continue to try new cheeses there is still plenty of room to grow the segment. Like nearly every other category, the downturn in the economy presents challenges for specialty cheese sales, for both cheese makers and retailers. Experts say the primary emphasis has been on promoting the over-



all category as opposed to individual brands, knowing that growing the segment will pay off for all of the parties in the long run.

“If we can help the whole category, even our competitors, we all win in the end,” says Michael Blum, sales and marketing manager for Dutch-made Beemster, which has U.S. operations based in Jersey City, N.J. “Cheese still has a long way to go. If you look around the supermarket perimeter, cheese still has the most room to grow and is a big threat to other departments. If retailers are willing to promote during these difficult economic times it should present a very good opportunity to grow sales.”

In addition to promotions, Beemster also sees the need to educate retailers. Part of that education process includes working with retailers to keep employee enthusiasm up. To do that, Blum says he is continually trying to develop promotions that help retailers generate sales. He is encouraged by the response from retailers and consumers.

“A lot of stores are asking for more promo-

tions, which is a great thing,” says Blum. “Feedback from our customers is the most important thing to us. If something is not going to sell well we are not going to push it.”

Even in these difficult times, Blum says many of Beemster’s customers are still buying as much cheese, if not more, than in the past, but they are asking for lower-priced alternatives. For example, while Beemster offers a 26-month-old cheese, Blum says retailers are more likely to be interested in less expensive five- and six-month-old cheeses.

LIGHTENING UP

“What’s really interesting is that there has been more consumer focus than ever on light cheese and eating healthy,” says Blum. “With lighter cheeses you might get customers that otherwise wouldn’t pick up a piece of cheese. That’s where putting samples out, getting people to taste might help gain market share and a broader base because now you are attracting not necessarily a cheese consumer but a health con-



scious consumer.”

Blum admits that attracting the health conscious consumer in order to expand the user base can be limited. Most say the best way is to educate consumers, noting that people are more apt to try something if they understand it better. Blum is a big proponent of creating large displays that are designed not only to sell cheese but tell the Beemster story as well.

In April Beemster introduced its first pre-shredded product, which comes in a 5-ounce clear cup so consumers can see the product. In May a reduced-fat light version of Beemster Shreds was introduced.

While Beemster is a relatively young brand in the U.S., Tillamook Cheese is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. In honor of its centennial, the Tillamook, Ore.-based cheese



maker is offering a three-year aged white extra sharp cheddar in a special 2-pound waxed wheel with anniversary labeling. The anniversary cheese is also available in an 18-ounce wedge, an 8-ounce square and a 2.5-pound shred. Many of Tillamook's products also feature a banner on its packaging that signifies that this is the company's 100th anniversary.

According to Jay Allison, vice president of sales and marketing for Tillamook Cheese, while the celebration will be year-long, the biggest celebration and biggest push is during the summer and fall. He adds that the 100th

anniversary also ties in with Tillamook's "Loaf Love" campaign, which includes tasting events with most of Tillamook's retail partners.

"We work closely with all of our supermarket customers to try and make sure the varieties of product and promotional programs we put together fit both our needs," says Allison. "We don't try to be the least expensive product on the shelf but we don't try to be the most expensive. We try to work within retailers' parameters and our parameters to be competitive while making sure we offer varieties of our product that meet their demographic. That's part of our biggest challenge, making sure each supermarket customer has their own niche. We have great cheddar cheese, but not all fit every customer."

Tillamook isn't the only company featuring new packaging. Northfield, Ill.-based Kraft is rolling out a new look for its Kraft natural cheese. According to Basil Maglaris, senior manager, corporate affairs representing U.S. cheese business for Kraft, the redesign is intended to provide a new look and feel to the

line. "As people look for a way to make dishes with fresh ingredients and natural products the appeal of natural cheese is important," says Maglaris. "We are looking for ways to keep our natural cheese products fresh and contemporary with consumers."

Maglaris says it is important for Kraft to keep its iconic brands relevant. One way they do so is by emphasizing and expanding the snacking opportunities that various cheeses lend themselves to, including some that may not necessarily be associated with snacking. For example, the company is increasing usage occasions for its Philadelphia cream cheese. Kraft has introduced "new savory flavors" for the soft Philadelphia cream cheese that come in a tub. The launch includes an advertising campaign promoting its use on a cracker.

Kraft has also launched a campaign for its Singles called "Smiles Under a Single," which Maglaris says highlights the value of Kraft Singles and its ability to make a grilled cheese sandwich for less than a dollar. □