

FOOD & DRINK
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Edible, Affordable Indulgences for 2009

Could frozen hemp milk provide a silver lining for the food business in a down economy?

The National Association for the Specialty Food Trade anticipates a 4% downturn for the industry this year. But sales in subcategories like specialty beverages, snacks and premium chocolate continue to grow.

The reason: These less pricey items are a means for people to continue to treat themselves well when times are challenging, says Ron Tanner, NASFT's vice president of communication and education.

In a 2008 specialty-food industry report, dollar sales for gourmet snacks increased nearly 31%, drinks jumped as much as 37% (depending on the type) and candy rose about 85% between 2005 and 2007.

Food and beverage market research firm Packaged Facts predicts that upscale chocolate sales will outperform the entire chocolate industry by five times by 2012. Packaged Facts's chocolate report also forecasts that as more Americans become strapped for cash, large-ticketed luxuries are likely to be replaced by these "little pleasures."

Likewise, consumer market research company Mintel anticipates sales in the nonalcoholic beverage sector to grow by 24% between 2007 and 2012. Mintel's analysis attributes the growth to the rising popularity of a "new generation of beverages that offer something extra to the consumer," such as antioxidants, energy or vitamins, as consumers demand more from their drinks.

The positive outlook for these industries signals that, despite the economy, we'll still permit ourselves small indulgences when it comes to food and drink.

A look at a few out-of-the-ordinary products to be introduced this year:

Goat Milk Goods



The use of goat milk was on the rise in 2008, according to a survey of goat milk processors by the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service. With this trend continuing, new goat milk products will hit store shelves this year.

Redwood Hill Farms in Sonoma County, Calif., started releasing fresh quarts of goat milk into the marketplace about six weeks ago. The company also plans to add to its line of goat milk kefir, a cultured probiotic yogurt beverage, throughout 2009, starting with a pineapple orange mango version this spring.

"Even though our major products for the past 20 years have been goat milk cheeses and yogurt, we had enough milk to be able to expand our line to beverages," says Jennifer Lynn Bice, co-owner of Redwood Hill Farms.

Gourmet goat milk ice cream company Laloo's, also in Sonoma County, will introduce goat milk chocolate bars and vanilla goat milk ice cream sandwiches in March.

The chocolate bars will be available in black mission fig, chocolate cajeta (traditional Mexican caramel with toffee), rumplemint, capraccino (with espresso beans) and plain milk chocolate.

Goat milk benefits: Goat milk contains a smaller fatty acid chain than cow's milk, which makes it easier for the body to break down and digest. It's also about 10% lower in lactose than cow's milk.

In the U.S., hemp is often associated with marijuana or rope. The plant's distant relation to Cannabis has raised concerns over its THC levels, the psychoactive substance found in the illegal drug.

But findings published in the July/August 2008 Journal of Analytical Toxicology indicate that hemp foods in the marketplace do not contain detectable levels of THC.

Now, food companies are trying to overcome the challenges of shedding the mysteries of hemp by introducing it as milk, protein powder and nuts (shelled hemp seeds) with some success.

According to a study by natural products market research firm SPINS, these are the top three growth-driving categories for the industry. The report found that from 2007 to 2008, sales of hemp milk grew about 162%, protein powder increased 21% and nuts rose 44%.

Living Harvest, the first company to commercially produce hemp milk in the U.S., hopes to cash in on that growth in April, when their hemp milk ice creams debut. The company will offer vanilla bean, chocolate fudge, toasted coconut and lime, coffee biscotti and mint chip. It will also introduce a cooking oil the same month.

Hemp milk benefits: Hemp milk contains no common allergens and is easily digestible. It also has some of the highest amounts of iron of all types of milks, has the same amount of protein as cow's milk and 92% of its fat content is made up of omega fatty acids (also known as "good fats").

Exporting the delicate Chinese fruit yumberry, or *yang-mei*, into the U.S. is not possible yet. The red, prickly fruit that resembles a soft lychee spoils quickly, which makes properly transporting the whole fruit difficult, says Terry Xanthos, founder of Frutzzo -- the first beverage company to offer bottled yumberry juice blends in America.

Processed in China as juice concentrate, the fruit has a sweet and tangy berry flavor with hints of pomegranate, making it a popular addition to beverages.

That's why yumberry has been making initial appearances in bottled drinks and restaurant cocktails. Several new beverages with the fruit juice are already slated to come out in the early half of this year.

R.W. Knudsen Family will introduce Organic Yumberry, a drink with a blend of organic yumberry and berry juices.

Anheuser Busch's subsidiary 9th Street Beverages is debuting a line of 180 Energy All-Natural energy drinks at select Super Bowl events and will then launch them nationwide. One of the three -- 180 All-Natural Orange Citrus -- will contain a mixture of orange and yumberry flavors.

Frutzzo also plans to offer four new juices, including a yumberry-pomegranate version.

Yumberry benefits: Yumberry is high in antioxidants, specifically Oligomeric Proanthocyanidins (OPCs). Antioxidants are dietary substances that prevent and repair cell damage by battling molecules called free radicals.

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