

DELI BUSINESS

MARKETING MERCHANDISING MANAGEMENT PROCUREMENT

DEC./JAN. 2012 \$14.95

Healthy Deli



ALSO INSIDE

DELI MEAT OVERVIEW
MEDITERRANEAN FOODS
TAKE OUT OPTIONS
PÂTÉS
CHEESE PLATES
BLUE CHEESE
FRENCH CHEESE



CHEESE CORNER

The Quintessential Cheese Plate 35

Assembling a nonpareil tasting of cheeses

American Blues Are Staking Their Claim .. 41

Domestic Blue cheeses are winning over consumers and winning competitions

French Indulgences 46

Positioning French cheese as an affordable luxury



COMMENTARIES

EDITOR'S NOTE

Health Messaging Is Kiss of Death 10

PUBLISHER'S INSIGHTS

Fighting Obesity with Good Food 12

MARKETING PERSPECTIVE

The New Merchandising Centerpiece 49

IN EVERY ISSUE

DELI WATCH 8

INFORMATION SHOWCASE 50

BLAST FROM THE PAST 50

French Indulgences

Positioning French cheese as an affordable luxury

BY KAREN SILVERSTON

The prolonged economic downturn has changed the way Americans shop and may be the “new normal.” If that is indeed the case, deli operators must navigate new waters to find whatever stability they can.

Consumers are no longer buying with abandon, but they haven’t given up on affordable indulgences — high quality, unique items that while expensive in large quantities are easy to rationalize in small amounts.

Stephanie Jordan, cheese specialist for Tony’s Fine Foods, West Sacramento, CA, importer and distributor of domestic and imported cheeses and perishable foods, sees specialty cheeses flown in from France selling well alongside excellent domestic options. “Consumers still want those special French cheeses and like them in a small format, so they’re not spending as much per piece as when they buy a larger format,” says Jordan.

According to Pascal Vaydie, import sales director, Lactalis Deli, New York, NY, “The products that manage not to suffer from the decline are those that are truly unique. These products have strong points of difference versus the domestic items — there aren’t really any alternatives to them.”

Deli operators are now contending with a cohort of consumers who have never before experienced economic doldrums and who, therefore, have no institutional memory of how to respond. “Consumers still want to buy French cheese but are careful about where they shop, what they do and what they buy. This downturn is something those in their 30s have never seen,” says Helder dos Santos, sales manager for Chicago, IL-based importer and distributor C. E. Zuercher & Co., Inc. “I tell shops to be less concerned about price and more concerned about how much is selling and how much is spoiling. People are still spending money — just not in the same way. They’re not spending on things they never heard of or haven’t tried. They’re buying what they know they’ll like.”

Although cheese doesn’t occupy the same exalted position in the States that it



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHEESES OF FRANCE

does in France, French cheese nonetheless enjoys a devoted following here. “Cheese doesn’t make it to the plate in every meal here as it does in France,” says Jeff Babcock, cheese category manager for European Imports, Ltd., Chicago, IL. “There’s cheese in everybody’s refrigerator there and it’s relatively inexpensive. In some places here there’s still a sense that French cheese is the epitome. It’s classic, and what we consider classic remains a solid foundation — it’s not diminished by a phenomenon or a trend.”

That solid foundation, however, is not impervious to competition. Cost issues and the push for local ingredients that led people to buy more domestic products have negatively impacted imported Goat Cheese and Brie sales. “They tend to be ingredient cheeses — and tend to be selected by price in an economy particularly sensitive to food

costs. Americans are now creating cheeses that are very good, so people see them as alternatives,” says Babcock.

Making the Most of a Difficult Situation

Retailers can expand the audience for French cheese by positioning it as something to be enjoyed often, not just on special occasions. “We want to reinforce the notion of spicing up everyday food fare. That’s an experience consumers can relate to,” says Jean-Marie Sepancy, strategic services director at New York, NY-based Jaffe & Partners, agency for The Cheeses of France, a marketing council. “Taking a very American-style approach — choosing an American dish, adding French cheese — will appeal to a much broader audience in a more relatable way. The easier you make it for people, the

more likely they will be to try it.

"The majority of consumers are concerned first and foremost with whether they like it," she continues. "Cost plays a part as do health considerations. And people should know that French cheeses are healthy, nutrient-rich food." Sepancy underscores that hormones are not used in French dairies.

The Cheeses of France promotions include tasting programs across the country, Internet resources and social networking, plus an online advertising component. "French cheese competes not only with American but with all imported cheeses — and The Cheeses of France is happy to have the spotlight in a gourmet or cheese shop environment," Sepancy adds.

Quality remains an important selling feature, so it behooves retailers to emphasize AOC (Appellations d'Origines Contrôlées) cheeses. The English nomenclature for products with such tightly controlled production methods is PDO — protected designation of origin. The PDO concept is gaining traction in this country among consumers who have embraced local foods. Jean-Louis Carbonnier, president of New York, NY-based Carbonnier Communications, which represents Comté PDO in the U.S., explains, "A strong element of PDO cheeses is the quality and guarantee of certain practices they give to consumers. Quality has been the key to success for retailers."

Geographically specific cheeses have fared better than others in the economic crisis, prompting the Fédération Nationale des Appellations d'Origines Contrôlées, Poligny, France to say: Tell me what cheese you're eating and I'll tell you what part of the landscape you're strengthening.

The Basics...

Consumers have come to expect a deli cheese case to include certain basic cheeses. France's iconic cheeses make selecting "the" cheese impossible, but masterfully opulent Triple Crèmes are essential year-round and most distributors offer numerous delectable varieties.

Lovely aged Goat Cheeses run the gamut from creamy to dense and delicate to piquant — devotees are charmed by the mosaic of scents and flavors. "Even if we have a good domestic version available, they're still in demand," says Jordan of Tony's Fine Foods.

For the discerning nose, imported Brie and Camembert must deliver authentic aroma as well as taste, and the newest formulations are right on the money even though they're made from pasteurized milk, a necessity for the American market which demands that raw-milk cheeses be aged for a



PHOTO COURTESY OF COMTE CHEESE ASSOCIATION

minimum of 60 days.

A limited audience lusts after the quintessential "stinky" cheese, Epoisses, washed with Marc de Bourgogne, and other washed rind cheeses.

In the world of cheese, Roquefort's magical presence is unequalled. It's produced only eight months a year using whole, raw milk of Lacaune sheep. Packaging is retail friendly, and whole wheels are available for specialty stores.

Comté is unrivaled in flavor, appearance and history, unique in size, yet available in convenient formats. The Comité Interprofessionnel du Comté — or Comté Cheese Association — provides resources for trade at www.comte-usa.com, and Comté importer Daphne Zepos, Essex Cheese, New York, NY, has a video at www.essexcheese.com demonstrating how to cut an 80-pound wheel of Comté into half-pound portions.

An eloquent expression of the Jura Mountain community, Comté is preserving cheese tradition and at the same time protecting the environment. "To make Comté,

you have to pool milk from small farms together — and the concept of small farms is a relative anomaly in the U.S., but whether it is in France, Switzerland or America, it is necessary to protect the small farms," says Carbonnier. Owners of magnificent Montbéliarde cows take pride in the fact that the milk reflects the pastures where the animals have been, and consumers are becoming aware of the social relevance as well as the extraordinary taste of mountain cheese.

And Beyond...

There will always be consumers looking for something new and delicious. Before the downturn, many such quests were sparked by a competitive streak; today many consumers are still seeking new cheeses, but now it's for their own enjoyment.

"The adventurous consumers want something more than 'creamy' — they're looking for flavor and looking at style. If a cheese looks traditional and has personality, they'll like it, especially one that looks handmade. Consumers have seen beautiful artisanal cheeses and they're looking for them," says Cecile Delannes, ambassador for the French Cheese Club, an association of five French family-owned traditional cheese producers based in College Park, MD.

A new cheese gaining success is Normanne, a Camembert-style cheese in a 1-kilo — 2.2 pounds — format, produced in Normandy by E. Graindorge. Consumers also are intrigued by the marriage of Normandy's cheeses and its famous Calvados — apple brandy. Grain d'Orge is washed with it, and it is an ingredient in Camembert au Calvados cheese.

Le Roulé, a hand-rolled cow's milk cheese with a swirl of garlic and herbs, is an example of growing interest in a well-known import. "Le Roulé has been distributed in the U.S. for 25 years. In the last two years, sales have boomed. Consumers are requesting high-quality products that are different from what is produced in the U.S.," says Marie Lesoudier, general manager of Laura Chenel's Chèvre, Sonoma, CA.

European Imports' Babcock notes growth in sheep's milk cheeses, such as Basque cheese. "We don't have the sheep population domestically to grow the market share so we can't really compare to, for example, an Ossau Iraty you can find for \$15-\$16 a pound," says Babcock. The Ossau Iraty produced by Fromagerie Agour was named Best Cheese in the World at the 2011 Word Cheese Awards in London.

The established reputation of French sheep's milk cheeses accounts for their ongoing popularity. "There is nothing quite like them," Lactalis' Vaydie notes. **DB**