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Trend Watch

From Italian to Organic



As consumers are trending toward organic everything, sales of organic pasta and sauces have been steadily increasing in their own rights. BY RAJIV LEVENTHAL

According to a 2009 survey done by market researcher Mintel, among six food and beverage sectors, organic shelf-stable foods and organic dairy products are the most likely to have been purchased in the previous year by respondents. With food prices rising and the recession taking its toll, consumers have likely handpicked sectors and sub-sectors to trade down in, choosing less expensive, all natural items in their stead. Of the six food and beverage sectors, this category of "other" shelf-stable organic foods were the most likely to have been purchased in the last year. Top products include organic pasta sauce and pasta.

Further, according to recent data from SPINS, among products that have at least 70 percent organic content, sales of refrigerated pasta, shelf-stable pasta and shelf-stable pizza sauces have all gone up from 2009-10 in natural supermarkets. Particularly, sales of organic refrigerated pasta in that time frame saw the highest increase, with a 120.8 percent dollar spike.

"Over the past few years, the health benefits associated with eating a Mediterranean diet coupled with the affordability of pasta and sauce dishes has led to resurgence in the [organic pasta and sauce] category," said Kory Kazimour, senior brand manager for Simply Organic (Norway, IA), makers of all kinds of pasta sauces. "Expanded varieties of new red, white and pink sauces seasoned with herbs

and spices have recently been introduced."

Overall, there is no doubt that the consumer is far more in tune to organic now than in recent years. According to Terry Ferrari, office manager and quality assurance manager of Massimo's Organic Gourmet (San Francisco, CA), today, the organic consumer is broad based—not just "hippies" that have been organic for quite some time—and it has gone beyond the trendy restaurant that grows its own vegetables and uses them in seasonal creations.

Organic Options

Simply Organic offers six Italian-style seasoning mixes to top off any pasta—four organic spaghetti sauce mixes as well as an Alfredo and Sweet Basil Pesto Sauce mix. The packets make it easy to enjoy authentic, full-flavored regional Italian flavors without starting from scratch, said Kazimour. The seasoning mixes are also certified kosher, gluten-free and vegan. "With a two-year shelf life, the spaghetti sauce mixes can be conveniently stored in the cupboard for future use. Simply Organic seasoning mixes are free of hydrolyzed vegetable protein, modified food starch, hydrogenated oils and genetically engineered ingredients. Thus, consumers are eating wholesome pure food."

Massimo's three pasta sauces (Tomato Basil, Caprese and Cabernet Mushroom), meanwhile, are produced with the freshest and most flavorful Certified Organic ingredients, said



Ferrari. Massimo's Tomato Basil is the company's classic base sauce from which countless variations of sauces are conceived. Ingredients include organic tomatoes, organic onions, organic extra virgin olive oil and organic fresh basil. Its Caprese sauce is the signature sauce of southern Italy, made with organic wild capers and organic Kalamata olives. The company's hearty Cabernet Mushroom sauce is the perfect compliment to a cut pasta dish such as rigatoni, said Ferrari.

"We believe that the uniqueness is in the fact that our recipes are created in our gourmet kitchens and not a laboratory," he said. "We actually use very little ingredients in our sauces. What you see and taste is what you get."

Massimo's also offers several pasta entrées, including its Linguine Pesto Pasta, which showcases linguine noodles covered with homemade Organic Pesto sauce, which is loaded with fresh organic basil, garlic and extra virgin olive oil. Additionally, the company's Pennette with Organic Porcini Mushrooms is a Tuscan-inspired combination of tubular Penne noodles layered with Massimo's homemade, thymescented Organic Porcinie mushroom sauce, plus fresh mozzarella cheese and freshly grated Parmesan.

Trends

As more consumers go organic, natural product retailers need to perfect product demonstrations in their stores. Kazimour shared that Simply Organic's Italian style seasoning mixes lend themselves to sampling. The mixes can be cooked up using a hot plate as they require only a few simple ingredients (diced tomatoes, olive oil, milk, butter, etc.) and then can be served on Melba toast or with a bread stick (like a dipping sauce).

Ferrari added that the consumer is now interested in tasting the product during in-store demos, where at one time they were completely uninterested. It is through retail stores and demonstrations that have helped to educate the consumer as to what organic really means, he said. "There is a misconception that organic means that it is more nutritional than natural or convention food items, but that is not the case. It's the no pesticides, no chemicals, no preservatives, no genetically modified organisms and not grown with water that contains any sewer sludge that makes the difference in organic."



“Pasta is comfort food and is appreciated when there is a chill in the air. Given that February is heart month, red sauces that are heart healthy can provide a natural tie-in.”

— Kory Kazimour, Senior Brand Manager, Simply Organic

Keep in mind for sampling that pasta sauces tend to exhibit seasonality during the colder months of the year, with January and February being strong sales months, Kazimour added. "Pasta is comfort food and is appreci-

ated when there is a chill in the air. Given that February is heart month, red sauces that are heart healthy can provide a natural tie-in.

"In terms of partnering organic products for an end cap, the ideal display would pair a variety of dry pastas with our Italian style line of seasoning mixes," he said. "The display could also include olive oil and cans of diced tomatoes. For additional cross-promotion, a retailer could add bread sticks, jars of pitted Kalamata olives and our Simply Organic Italian Seasoning, Basil, Oregano or Thyme."

Kazimour said he's also seeing a strong growth in gluten-free offerings. "Whether due to health reasons or a lifestyle choice, many consumers are trying to lessen gluten in-take and the pasta/sauce category is no exception. Simply Organic Italian-style mixes are certified gluten-free by the Gluten-Free Certification Organization (GFCO) and can be used not only as a topper for pasta, but as an ingredient in a recipe."

Another trend in the organic pasta and sauce categories is packaging. "The customers that are in tune to organic do not want to see a lot of money and paper/plastic being used for packaging," said Ferrari. "They want to be able to see the product. Additionally, you will find many more organic pasta sauces on the shelf today than there were as little as two years ago. Even companies that are known for their conventional sauces are coming out with a flavor or two that are organic."

And, if the product is Certified Organic, Ferrari continued, as not all products are, then it is absolutely a guarantee of the pureness of the product. "If the product is certified, then it will have the certification logo on the product. This is something that the consumer has yet to come to understand completely. Just because it says made with organic ingredients, there is no auditing process to assure that this statement is true and correct.

"Going along with the natural and pure aspect of organic, we have found that packaging has also gone in that direction," Ferrari concluded. "No fancy labels or containers are really the trend in this moment. Something that looks more artisan and 'home made' is definitely the way to go."

For More Information:

- Massimo's Organic Gourmet, (415) 920-6843
- Simply Organic, (319) 227-7996