

That's Entertaining!

The holidays are the perfect season for people to spend time with the ones they love. Entertaining is huge during this time, and people are looking for ways to bring new recipes and homemade flavors to their friends and family without having to sacrifice time spent with them. "Customers are wondering how to juggle already busy days with the extra challenge of preparing a special meal," says Judy Kales of Bountiful Pantry in Nantucket, Massachusetts (www.bountifulpantry.com). Today's specialty foods offer a great solution. They are so quick and easy to use that even the worst chef can whip up delicious dips, drinks and desserts. Here are some food trends to keep an eye out for during the 2012 holiday season:

Unique: Traditions are both sustained and created in the holiday spirit, and consumers are looking for mixes and recipes that are both familiar favorites and new traditions. Country Home Creations, Inc., in Goodrich, Michigan (www.countryhomecreations.com), offers a Lemon Cooler with Gingerbread Dip Mix. It may be odd to see lemons in December, but the traditional gingerbread pulls you right back into the holiday spirit. Country Home Creations offers a variety of other mixes as well, including a Holiday Cheeseball Mix and Holiday Garlic Spread Mix.

All-Natural: Dave Beach of The King's Cupboard in Red Lodge, Montana (www.kingscupboard.com), says that "easy" and "all-natural" are the buzz words he has been hearing for the upcoming holidays. More and more people are looking for all-natural ingredients in their baking and cooking. Jill McCauley from The Invisible Chef in Canton, Ohio (www.theinvisiblechef.com), notes that packaged mixes that use all-natural ingredients are a great way to provide that homemade taste while saving time in the kitchen. "Customers



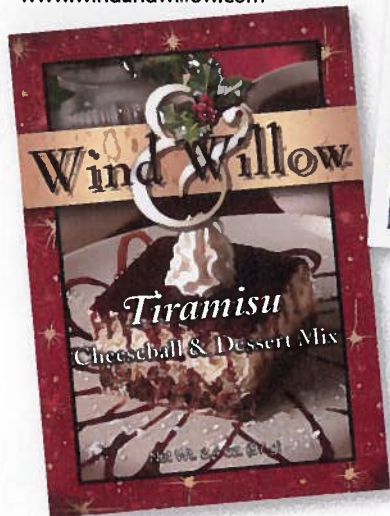
Bananas Foster Cheeseball Mix
North Aire Market, Inc.
800-662-3781
www.northairemarket.com

Snug Harbor Bloody Mary Mix
Blue Crab Bay Co. /
Bay Beyond, Inc.
800-221-2722
www.baybeyond.com



Tiramisu Cheeseball & Dessert Mix

Wind & Willow, Inc.
888-427-3235
www.windandwillow.com



Molten Chocolate Cake Mixes

The King's Cupboard
800-962-6555
www.kingscupboard.com

Vanilla Creme Brulee Coffee

Door County Coffee & Tea Co.
800-856-6613
www.doorcountycoffee.com



Chocolate Peppermint Sweet Muffin Cake

The Invisible Chef
800-456-7115
www.theinvisiblechef.com

are selecting products that are made with high-quality, all-natural ingredients so when they bake them, they are getting as close to homemade as they can get," she notes.

Gluten-Free: Conor Lee of Buyer's Best Friend, Inc., an online resource for ordering specialty foods from more than 1,000 vendors (www.bbfdirect.com), has noted a big increase in gluten-free items, which are essential for people suffering from celiac disease and wheat and gluten sensitivities. Lee notes some favorites from Buyer's Best Friend, including Gluten-Free Chocolate Coconut Pecan Mix from This Chick Bakes and Gluten-Free Banana Bread Mix from Truly Organic Baking.

Versatile: Often, mixes can be combined with other ingredients to create a whole new recipe. Blue Crab Bay Co., in Melfa, Virginia (www.baybeyond.com), offers Sting Ray and Snug Harbor Bloody Mary Mixers that can be used not only for cocktails, but also gazpacho, chili and pasta sauce. Becky Goldberg of North Aire Market, Inc., in Shakopee, Minnesota (www.northairemarket.com), notes that her company's holiday drink mixes are great to serve at a party because people can use different liquors to prepare them. For instance, Chocolate Snowman can be mixed with Kahlua or Amaretto, and Rudolph's Red Nose Smoothie can be made with cherry vodka or white rum.

Setting out recipe cards next to mixes is a great way to show the versatility of a product and encourage customers to try something they might not have considered. Most specialty food companies have recipe cards available for stores.

Nostalgic: This is still a top reason why customers choose specialty foods. "Comfort foods and nostalgia are still strong," says North Aire's Goldberg. "Flavors that remind people of years ago and good times with family. New flavor profiles always come on the market, but at the holidays in particular, traditional flavors with a fun twist are welcome at every holiday event."



Gluten-Free? No Problem

If you carry all-natural or gluten-free food products, let your customers know that you offer these health-conscious goodies. Create a special display, promote the items on Facebook, or send out an e-mail alert.



Scotch Bonnet Pepper Boucan Glaze

Bell Buckle
Country Store, Inc.
931-359-8000
www.bellbuckle.com

Don't Forget the Display

With specialty foods, the flavor and ingredients are key. But just as important are the packaging and display. Lee of Buyer's Best Friend notes that delicious food with a brilliant packaging design is sure to hook any consumer. McCauley from The Invisible Chef suggests displaying specialty foods in a way that tells a story. She suggests showcasing her company's Christmas Cookie Mixes next to cookie cutters and baking sheets, or featuring a loaf pan next to the Cranberry Pecan Coffee & Tea Cake Mix. Or add colorful mixing bowls, fun holiday-themed muffin liners, or colorful aprons and baking mitts.

And when it comes to promoting your food products, sampling is the best way to get the items moving off the shelves. "I've said it before, and I'll say it again," says Shirley Kautman-Jones of Country Home Creations. "Sampling sells!" In addition to sampling, though, Kautman-Jones notes that it is important to have the stocked product readily available next to the sampled merchandise. "People will eat it, but they won't hunt for it in the store." **SR**