



Pasta & Sauces

A Winning Combination



Great taste, versatility, convenience and value have made pasta and sauces a favourite Canadian duo, and their popularity shows no sign of letting up.

When I was a boy growing up in St. Leonard, a suburb of Montreal then mostly populated by Italian immigrants, Thursday evening was “Macaroni Night.” My grandmother would have the family over and, over heaping plates of spaghetti or rigatoni or penne topped with rich tomato sauce and huge meatballs, our family would gather to talk, to laugh and to share the week’s events.

Fast-forward a quarter of a century. What we used to call macaroni is now called pasta but, by whatever name, it’s still a die-hard comfort food for Canadians. In fact, in President’s Choice Second Annual Healthy Eating Survey conducted last year, comfort foods such as macaroni and cheese were identified as a solid weakness for 40% of Canadians.

Why is pasta such a perennial favourite? “It tastes great, it’s easy to prepare, it’s cost effective, you can feed a lot of people and it’s just a crowd pleaser,” says Diana Robinson, a spokesperson for Ronzoni. “And it doesn’t matter how big the crowd. If you’re cooking for one or you’re cooking for 20, it’s easy to prepare a great pasta meal.”

Facing Concerns

While Canadians love pasta, they’re also concerned about eating more nutritiously. “Thanks’ mostly to the Atkins diet the word spread that, nutritionally speaking, pasta was “bad.”

“All the pasta manufacturers went through a very rough time about four years ago, but pasta sales have come back to pre-Atkins days,” says Anthony Pantaleo, director of marketing, sourcing and procurement at Italtasta Limited. Consumers are more knowledgeable now about what’s good and what’s not, that even regular pasta is a healthy product, with high fibre and low cholesterol just some of the many advantages that pasta can boast. “People have realized that it’s all about a balanced diet, wherein the Atkins days, ‘carbohydrates’ was a bad word,” continues Pantaleo, “and that’s why the category has bounced back.”

The health issue has been addressed through a variety of methods. “The one good thing that came out of the Atkins diet years was the introduction of whole grains. What we initially thought was a fad has turned into a lifestyle,” continues Pantaleo. Whole wheat and multi-grain pasta sales are booming. In fact, Italtasta has experienced double-digit growth. “We’re devoting our energies to developing new and different blends of whole grains because

that's what people are looking for." Italpasta is also currently at work on line extensions.

Ronzoni has tackled the health issue head on with the release of Catelli's Smart Pasta this fall. What's so unique about it? "It's a white pasta with all the fibre benefit of whole wheat," replies Robinson. "It's really a way for people to build into healthier, nutritious living and eating and yet still get the comfort foods that they love: The best of both worlds."

Ronzoni boasts its Smart Pasta will provide 36% of the daily requirement of fibre, and it is actually part of the Heart and Stroke Foundation Health Check Program, as it meets the specific nutrient criteria based on *Canada's Food Guide to Healthy Eating*.

A Potent Combo

"Pasta is one of the most accepted forms of meals around the world," says Ali Khan-Bajauri, senior director, marketing, Maple Leaf Foods. "We expect the category to continue to grow in line with consumer awareness and demand."

"Where pasta shines is its ease of preparation combined with simple yet fresh, high-quality ingredients," says Deb Crisan, senior vice-president, sales and marketing, Rao's Specialty Foods. Robinson concurs, "Pasta gives you the ability to create something special, as you can prepare a sauce and add to it, you can put in it whatever favourites for you and your family and with basic staples that you might have in your cupboard." Not only is pasta a household staple, but it offers the opportunity to enhance or showcase additional categories.

This is where sauces come into their own. Sauces made without sugar or fillers such as water or tomato paste are popular, as are those made with imported Italian tomatoes, which create a very sweet and low acidic profile due to the rich volcanic soil of their country of origin. As well, "marinara

Maximize Your Macaroni

We asked industry and grocery professionals how to give your pasta some pizzazz:

DO YOUR HOMEWORK. Pay attention to what the consumers want and follow the trends, says Diana Robinson of Ronzoni. "Make sure you include the healthier, more nutritious products that are coming along. We've already seen it in conversation with our customers, but the whole wheat categories are growing on the shelf," says Anthony Pantaleo, Italpasta.

THE SPICE OF LIFE. The savvy retailer should have a variety of segments within this category to offer loyal customers, suggests Deb Crisan of Rao's Specialty Foods. "That includes natural and organic pasta and sauces, as well price-sensitive offerings for those on a budget." "If you have a small section, expand it," agrees Harry Watson, manager of South Hill Fine Foods in Moose Jaw, Sask. "Variety is the thing. People want variety."

HIDE-AND-SEEK. Don't make it hard to find your pasta and sauces, counsels Robinson. "Use your end caps. If you don't have the products your customers are looking for, they're going to get them somewhere else."

MAKE IT FRESH. "If you have the opportunity to access fresh pasta, access them, and if you can make your own sauces in your deli, make them," suggests Watson. "Customers are looking for something fresh. Pasta is a growing category in our part of the country."

THINK OUTSIDE THE CONTINENT. Canadian grocers must start looking outside of North America to see how dramatically fresh-refrigerated products are changing not only consumer behaviour but also the retail landscape, says Maple Leaf Food's Ali Khan-Bajauri. "Retailers who can grow their refrigerated space the fastest, whether it is for national brands or for their own labels or both, the better they will meet consumer needs and long-term sustainable growth."

BUILD FLAVOURS AND VARIETY. Many consumers may not be familiar with pasta, especially if they are new to the country, says Judy Bennett of Colemans Food Centre in Corner Brook, N.L. "Grocers need to demo the product and hand out coupons with recipe ideas."

THINK AHEAD. Retailers must take a long-term view and be realistic about expectations. "You can't expect a new pasta to do as well in the first year of its launch as a product that's been around for five or ten years," says Khan-Bajauri. "But, like whole wheat pasta, for example, it will eventually gain momentum, critical mass and consumer respect and trust if it is in line with what the consumer wants."

sauces, tomato basil sauces and vodka sauces all rank high on IRI [Information Resources Inc.] sales data," says Crisan. IRI is a program that monitors retail sales.

Tick-tock

Convenience still seems to be a driver for consumers, especially during the workweek. With their busy lifestyles, consumers just do not have time and, with pasta, a meal can be

made in 20 minutes. "And it's also something you can have in the cupboard and you can pull out when you need it," says Robinson.

What's not to like about pasta? Nothing. "It's affordable, good-tasting and versatile, because you can add all sorts of ingredients to your sauces and have a healthy, balanced diet in doing so," says Pantaleo.

"Pasta just makes it easy!" concludes Robinson. ●