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## Beyond Salt: Specialty Caramel Innovations

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*Liddabit Sweets Caramels*

**An old-fashioned treat is in the midst of a revival, thanks to specialty producers conjuring up inventive flavors and alternative recipes.**

**By Anneliese Klainbaum**

Salt has breathed new life into the humble caramel. That impeccable pairing has been around for more than a decade, but only recently have consumers fallen for the innovative spin on the old-fashioned confection. And it has been an ideal gateway to the burgeoning world of specialty caramels.

More producers than ever before are crafting caramels sticky and soft, sweet and savory, delivering innovation by way of flavors and ingredients that are breathing new life into this confectionery category.

"Caramels are the new chocolate," says Curtis Vreeland, a confectionery industry trendspotter and consultant at Vreeland and Associates. "Like their chocolate bar brethren over the last five years, caramels have been upscaled in quality and expanded in flavor selection."

The big, brown flavor notes, he explains, make them an excellent base for innovative combinations that are helping to set caramels apart in a confectionery industry that Euromonitor International projects to reach sales of \$11.2 billion in the U.S. this year.

### Flavor Infusions Branch Out

Sea salt has proven a beloved match for caramel, and now producers are taking flavor experimentation to the next level, with spicy, savory, boozy, and botanical elements that play off of the candy's pleasant sweetness.

Steve Popplewell, lead chocolatier at Theo Chocolate in Seattle, says his company has seen a steady demand for caramels ever since the company added them in 2008. He adds that though the salted caramel trend is here to stay, a local and seasonal flavor boom has risen among confectioners.

"For us, that's meant harnessing the tastes of our region, like Washington apple cider, Walla Walla sweet onion, and coffee blends from esteemed local roasters," he says. Similarly, Fat Toad Farm, based in Vermont, offers a maple caramel sauce featuring locally sourced maple syrup.

No stranger to nontraditional ingredients, Theo struck gold with its ghost chile-infused caramels in 2011. Today, spicy flavorings abound, from sofi Award winner Bissinger's for its apple ghost chile salt caramels to Amella's on-trend chocolate Sriracha caramels.

Producers are milking the trusty salt pairing by experimenting with exotic varieties—including Himalayan pink salt, Celtic sea salt, Hawaiian red sea salt, and hickory-smoked salts—for different takes on the mainstay. A 2014 sofi winner, Fran's Chocolates gray salt caramel sources sea salt off the French coast of Brittany.

Seasonings and spice aren't the only source of inspiration for suppliers. In a nod to the rising craft distillery movement, Jonboy makes caramels in absinthe with black salt and whiskey with smoked salt, while Hot Cakes offers a rye whiskey caramel sauce. Coffee-flavored caramels are getting upgrades, too, mimicking specific beverages, like Big Picture Farm's cocoa latte caramels, Suss' cappuccino variety, and even cold brew caramels from Fat Toad Farm.

Some companies walk to the beat of a different drum, creating outlandish flavors with surprisingly pleasing results. Brooklyn, N.Y.'s Liddabit Sweets offers combinations like beer and pretzels, fig ricotta, and pecan banana bread. Lula's Chocolate in Monterey, Calif., has concocted matcha green tea and lime flavors. And Spoonable, which is expanding its business into foodservice and private label, offers caramel sauces infused with lavender and sesame, in addition to salted and chile varieties.

"I think the secret to making a great flavor combo is to always let the flavor of the caramel shine through," says Tammy Fahey, owner of New Hampshire-based Suss. "You need to be able to taste the buttery richness that caramel is loved for."

Fahey employs a distinctive form for her handmade caramels: thin, quarter-pound rolls rather than bite-size pieces. Vanilla with sea salt is the top seller, she says, and seasonally inflected offerings include pumpkin with sea salt and the new cappuccino and gingerbread flavors. All varieties, she notes, put the caramel flavor first.

### Alternative Ingredients Draw New Customers

Several producers are shaking up the traditional butter-and-sugar recipes with alternative dairy and sweeteners and vegan options that are energizing the category.

Fat Toad Farm and Big Picture Farm are among a handful of Vermont caramel producers replacing cow's milk with goat. The result is a close relative to Mexican *cajeta*—a rich,



complex, almost musky caramel sauce that's a welcome treat for lactose-intolerant customers.

Fat Toad Farm's newest products leverage partnerships with specialty brands to show a higher-quality ingredient list. Its spicy dark chocolate caramel sauce features Taza chocolate, and its cold brew flavor uses Stumptown Coffee Roasters coffee. The original, however, remains the best seller, Porcaro says. "It lets you taste the subtly sweet tang of the goat's milk," she explains. "It's just goat's milk, pure cane sugar, and five hours of patient stirring."

Vegan caramel products are making waves, too, with companies like Hot Cakes and JJ Sweets offering coconut-based products that mimic the smooth, caramelized notes of classic butter caramels and sauces. Saskia Cervantes, director of sales and marketing at JJ Sweets, says the company's Cocomels line—which uses organic brown rice syrup in place of refined sugar—invites vegan and lactose-intolerant customers to indulge with on-trend flavors like espresso and sea salt, but it also show a broader audience that the category can still offer a new taste experience.

"We're working to pave the way with enlivening what people view caramels to be," Cervantes says, "showing that they are not some stuffy old treat."

Photos: Individual companies



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