

WELCOME TO THE WINTER FANCY FOOD SHOW



Fab five trends from the Winter Fancy Food Show

Premium peanut butter cups, breakfast-themed chocolates, great packaging graphics, hi-octane chocolates and smokey flavors set the tone for “keep-an-eye-on” confections.

By Curtis Vreeland // CONTRIBUTOR

In glancing at all the chocolate displayed at the San Francisco Winter Fancy Food Show, one didn't walk away with the impression that there was a looming global shortage of cocoa beans.

Numerous bowls of samples attested to the idea that new product development in the chocolate category is alive and well.

And demand remains strong. The Specialty Food Association released its annual *Today's Specialty Food Consumer* report last fall that ranked chocolate tops in all specialty foods purchased. How large is this market? According to the National Confectionery Association, premium chocolate sales increased 15 percent last year as compared with 4 percent for the overall market. But premium chocolate sales might actually be much higher, given that the report estimated that 14 percent of premium chocolate sales are transacted online and, consequently, omitted from typical checkout line, scanner-generated purchasing statistics.

So what are the hot trending chocolate and confectionery products? A tasting safari through the show, which is the West Coast's largest trade show dedicated to premium food products, revealed the following fab five:

- **Peanut butter cups for adults:** made with premium ingredients and less sugar to appeal to both adult snacking and moms for school lunch boxes.
- **Fun breakfast flavors:** Chuao Chocolatier offers nostalgia and fun with its new breakfast-themed bars.
- **Attention-grabbing labels:** bold new package graphics help make products stand out on increasingly crowded shelves.
- **Hi-octane chocolate:** driven by consumer demand for healthy antioxidants, these +80% cocoa mass bars are a challenge to produce so that they're still tasty.
- **Smokey:** Still trending.

I have selected eight of the best examples to chronicle these trends.

Premium peanut butter cups

The run-away success of *Justin's* Peanut Butter Cups, a nostalgic candy with premium ingredients jiggered to appeal to adult tastes, has attracted chocolate makers anxious to tap this market. Seattle-based craft chocolate powerhouse Theo Chocolate has launched a line of organic, non-GMO,

soy-free and Fair Trade-certified cups. They are also palm-oil free, a big point of differentiation, given they use coconut butter to achieve the needed emulsification of the filling. There is also a touch of rosemary oil to help with product preservation. The line is available in two flavors: *Dark* (55%) and *Milk* (45%). In the future, look for Theo to release more healthy candy bar formats based on childhood flavors.



Dana Kemmerling, natural channel sales and events manager, and Theo Chocolate Peanut Butter Cups; 1.4 oz./39 g. for a two-cup pack; \$2.29 S.R.P.

Vosges Haut-Chocolat's *Wild Ophelia* brand has also introduced a line of peanut butter cups, but true to founder Katrina Markoff's legendary product development creativity, these cups offer some distinctive variations. First, their ingredients are unique: toasted coconut, smoked salt, sundried bananas, chia seed and crispy cookie wafer. Second, the packaging is creative: resealable and containing six mini-cups. Both attributes target millennials, a consumer group that appreciates sharable, snackable, bite-sized pieces, says Markoff.

And third, an engaging back story. The brand has established the Ophelia Program, which asks customers to nominate young women entrepreneurs who embody Ophelia's spirit: passionate, lead with their hearts, have big dreams and are trying to find their career pates. The three top candidates with the best entrepreneurial ideas will be nominated as "the Ophelias," or brand CEOs, which is a year-long paid position. For the first three months, they will travel

around the country, collaborate with Markoff on new products and engage in social media to field this Americana story. When they return, they will work in different *Wild Ophelia* departments, so that they can learn about running a business. At the end of the year, they will present their entrepreneurial ideas to a panel of investors and hopefully get their ideas funded.

"I believe there is a new archetype of woman, who doesn't fall into the typical career categories – career woman, stay-at-home woman, have-it-all woman," Markoff says. "These aren't realistic [career expectations]. What is the new way of being? We want to support a young woman who is passionate and creative and marching to the beat of her own drum. It's a lonely place. This brand has a lot of soul in what it's doing and this is one of the first manifestations of this new product line."



Vosges Haut-Chocolat founder Katrina Markoff and her *Wild Ophelia* Peanut Butter Cups; 2.1 oz./60 g. for a six-cup pack; \$2.99 S.R.P.

For consumers with peanut, tree nut, gluten, egg, soy, sesame or coconut allergies, Boulder, Colo.-based Seth Ellis Chocolatier makes allergen-friendly chocolate cups that use roasted sunflower seed butter for a filling. This makes *Sun Cups* a big hit for moms to put into school lunchboxes. The cups are non-GMO Project Verified and use Rainforest Alliance chocolate. There are two flavors: *Milk Chocolate* and *Dark Chocolate* (60% cocoa mass).



Founder Seth Ellis and his child at the Seth Ellis Chocolatier Sun Cups; 1.5 oz./42 g. for a two-cup pack; \$1.99 S.R.P.

Chuaos remakes breakfast; and dishes up comfort, one bar at a time

The Chuaos Chocolatier booth always provides an upbeat refuge from a sea of serious salesmen and gunny-sack toting attendees. Designed as arrestingly as an ad in a tony shelter magazine, it's no wonder that the Chuaos booth was crowded and throbbing with energy. This year's theme and product launch celebrates an iconic American comfort institution: breakfast. In keeping with the good morning-theme, the booth was decorated to look like a bedroom, complete with a big white bed and red pajama-clad staffers. This theme was designed to underscore the launch of Chuaos's newest two products, Strawberry Waffle Wild and Cinnamon Cereal Smooch. Co-founder and Chef Michael Antonorsi explains his method:

"We want to give the chocolate bar a fun new approach, although culinary-driven, multi-textured and familiar, but revisited," he says. "Why breakfast? It's the most comforting meal of the day. While eating these bars, we are giving you that comforting emotional sense while eating your chocolate."

These new products follow a common theme of Chuaos's creative product development: chocolatizing and premiumizing classic American snack foods. Past examples include Pop Corn Pop, Potato Chip, Oh My S'Mores and Pretzel Toffee Twirl. It's a creative approach

to chocolate making, and a wonderfully fun counterpoint to those serious bean-to-barsmiths.



Chuao Chocolatier founder and master chef Michael Antonorsi and his Chuao Chocolatier Strawberry Waffle Wild and Cinnamon Cereal Smooch; 2.8 oz./80 g.; \$5.99 S.R.P.

Now see this: attention-grabbing graphics

Premium chocolate products can appear stuffy and elitist, while novelty products can have the reputation for being funny tasting. So, why can't a premium chocolate bar be both fun and delicious? That linkage is what ChocStars has set out to create. The UK-based company bought the rights to a British artist's anthropomorphic art and thereby created a 12-bar line of attention-grabbing labels. Recognizing the bars' gifting appeal, the back label contains space to record to/from information, thus turning the bar into a tasty and fun gift card. According to co-founder Richard O'Connor, his top three selling bars are Pop, Breakfast and Gigi.



ChocStars Gift Chocolate Bars; 3.0 oz./85 g.; \$3.99 - 4.50 S.R.P.

San Luis Obispo, Calif.-based Off the Farm Foods energy bar line provides another great example of attention-grabbing labels. The graphics are bold, old-school printing press-style fonts, no product picture and shout spot-on premium consumer trends: minimally processed/natural ingredients, (vaguely) local and craft-like. "We started by using fruits and nuts sourced from the bounty of the San Joaquin valley in California through the local farmers markets," explains co-founder Gary Thomas. "We do not use powders, additives or supplements to deliver nutrition. Our ingredients are 'off the farm!'" Available in three flavors: Blueberry Vanilla Almond; Strawberry Coconut Cashew; and Apple Cinnamon Pecan.



Off the Farm Foods Whole Food Energy Bars; 2.0 oz./57 g.; \$2.69 S.R.P.

High-octane chocolate

Over the last several years, there has been an increase in product launches of extreme (80%+) cocoa mass chocolate bars. According to Somerville, Mass.-based Taza Chocolate owner Alex Whitmore, it's a health and diet trend driven by chocolate lovers seeking more antioxidants and less sugar from their bars. Addressing this demand, Taza offers a 85% Mexican-style chocolate disc, 87% bar and now the 95% Wicked Dark Bar that was introduced at the show. Accompanying product literature proclaims, "If you're serious about dark chocolate, you'll love this barely sweet bar that lets the intensely fruity flavor notes of our Dominican cacao shine, with almost no bitterness." The Wicked Dark Bar contains tiny crunchy crystals of sugar, its only non-cocoa ingredient, that are critical to developing a roundness of flavor, "like how

a sprinkle of salt over a grilled steak makes the flavor pop," explains Whitmore.



Taza Chocolate's founder/chocolate maker Alex Whitmore and his Taza Chocolate Wicked Dark Bar; 2.5 oz./71 g.; \$5.00 S.R.P.

Smokey

Like Hoagie Carmichaels' well-loved ballet, smoky confections continue to beguile our eyes. Multi-SOFI-award winning chocolatier Poco Dolce Confections introduced Smoked Almond + Ghost Chile Salt Bittersweet Tiles inspired by the BBQ flavors she grew up with in Tennessee. Confectioner/owner Kathy Wiley's initial challenge was to recreate those hickory-smoked almond snacks, but without the artificial ingredients. She uses hickory wood and ghost chili-flavored sea salt that she believes combines better with the bittersweet chocolate, giving the bar a backyard essence of BBQ. The tiles were awarded first place in the 2015 Scoville Sweet Heat competition.

Poco Dolce Confections Smoked Almond + Ghost Chile Salt Bittersweet Tiles for an 8-tile box; 6 oz./170 g.; \$20 to \$22 S.R.P. ©

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