

Fab five confectionery and snack trends from the Summer Fancy Food Show:

Maize madness, snack flavors pivot to Asia, sprouted ingredients, confections on a Bourbon bender and anything goes chocolate

By Curtis Vreeland



What a banner year for sales of specialty foods!

Between 2012 and 2014, retail specialty food sales topped to \$85.5 billion, a robust 19.5% increase according to the *State of the Specialty Food Industry 2015* published by the [Specialty Food Association](#). That growth rate trounces the anemic 2% growth rate for all food sales during the same three year period.

Within the candy and individual snacks category, retail sales rocketed 27.2% to over \$2 billion, as compared with a 2.2% increase during the same

period for all candy and individual snack retail sales. And chocolate remains as the most popular specialty food purchased.

“The time is now for specialty food,” noted Ron Tanner, the association’s vice president of philanthropy, government and industry relations. “Consumers are looking for new tastes, foods with fewer and cleaner ingredients, health attributes and products that are made by companies with values they care about. All of these [attributes] define specialty food.”

And confectionery and snack products with new tastes and healthier ingredients were very much in evidence at the Specialty Food Association’s summer Fancy Food Show, which ran from June 28 to 30 at the New York City Javits Convention Center.

A tasting safari through the show revealed five emerging trends among sweets and snacks: multi-faceted gourmet popcorn products, snacks with sprouted ingredients and/or Asian flavors, bourbon spiked confections and as for chocolate NPD, all I can say is anything goes.

The summer show is when the association bestows its prestigious Specialty Outstanding Food Innovation (SOFI) awards, the food industry’s equivalent of the Oscars. I have noted in my review below if the product received a SOFI award.

Popcorn’s exploding product variety: Once considered as unhealthy movie theatre fodder, the gourmet popcorn category in recent years has shown amazing product innovation. Some producers use their kernels as taste vehicles for savory





seasonings, such as [Masala Pop's](#) *Chai Masala with Assam Tea*, [Madison Park Foods'](#) *Petite Maize with Colonial Tavern* seasoning, [Pop Art's](#) *White Cheddar Jalapeño* and [Live Love Pop's](#) *Lime Fresco* and *Salt & Vinegar* tortilla chip-inspired flavors.

For other producers, kernel size has become an important point of product differentiation. [Nazqiz](#) offers large kernel corn that is a traditional accompaniment to ceviche in Peruvian restaurants. The company's *Qancha Original* received a SOFI silver award in the vegan or gluten-free product category. While at the Lilliputian end of product scale, [Pipsnack](#) sells *Kettle Popcorn* (sweet snack SOFI gold) that focuses on the health and teeth saving benefits of their micro-kernel popcorn. And for those popcorn consumers with Goldilocks' in-the-middle preferences, [Halfpops](#) sells slightly popped

conventional-sized kernels catering to folks who pine for those bottom of the bowl spinsters.

Snacks with sprouted ingredients: While making foods with sprouted grains isn't new, it's mentioned in the Bible (*Ezekiel 4:9*), in recent years this trend has leaped from natural food stores to conventional supermarkets as consumers seek "good carbs" and healthier snacks. Appearing first in baked good, sprouted grains can now be found in numerous cereals and snacks. In fact, the percentage of new food launches in the US containing sprouted grains increased from 0.3% of launches in 2012 to 1% of launches in 2014, according to Datamonitor Consumer's Product Launch Analytics. *New Nutrition Business* magazine has identified foods with sprouted ingredients as the top functional natural trend of 2015 and projects 2018 sales of \$250 million.

Exhibitor [Way Better Snacks](#) produces corn tortilla chips made with sprouted seeds of quinoa, flax, chia and black beans. The company had just launched its ninth chip product, *Ginger Kiss Sweet Potato Chips*. Another exhibitor was [Living Intentions](#) who's *Gone Nuts!* line includes such products as *Maple Mesquite* containing sprouted walnuts and spices.

Asian inspired snack flavors: While the US Congress struggles with passing the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, Asian cuisine and flavors have already conquered American palates. It ranks as number 5 in the National Restaurant Association's *What's Hot 2015 Culinary Forecast*, ethnic cuisine and flavor category. Some examples: [Big Picture Farm's](#) *Goat Milk Chai Caramels* (confection SOFI gold), [Epic Provisions'](#) *Chicken Sesame BBQ Bar* (savory snack SOFI silver), [Sencha Naturals'](#) *Coconut Granules Green Tea Mints – Cardamom Cinnamon*



(confection SOFI silver), [Masala Pop's Saffron Rose Popcorn](#) (sweet snack SOFI silver) and [Pop Art's Nori Sesame](#)).



Bourbon spiked confections are a creative mash-up of artisanal spirits and confections. The popularity of Bourbon is definitely “on a bender”. According to the research firm Datassential, its appearance on restaurant menus has spiked 32% in the past four years. Last year a bourbon-confection won a SOFI gold ([Olive & Sinclair's Bourbon Nib Brittle](#)). Expanding on this trend this year was [Mapleland Farm's Barrel-Aged Maple Syrup](#) that utilizes used bourbon casks from a local distillery. In a fun extension to this product cycle, when Mapleland is

finished with these casks, it returns them back to the distillery who refills them with young bourbon to soak up that wonderful maple flavor. Another example of this trend is [Sugar Plum Chocolate's Whiskey Liquor Nuts](#), its new whiskey-flavored peanut snack.

Anything goes chocolate: Like Cole Porter's lyric, (“God knows, anything goes”) chocolate's flavor palates have expanded into realms unimaginable several years ago. Just look at this year's SOFI winners: [Laurie & Sons' Dangerously Delicious Black Licorice Chocolate Toffee](#) (SOFI gold), [Chocolat Moderne's Tangy Tomato Avant-Gard Bar](#) (SOFI silver) and [Milkboy Swiss](#)



[Chocolate's Switzerland Dark Chocolate with Essential Pine Tree Oil](#) (SOFI silver). Who knows where chocolate R&D is headed, but rest assured, it will be exciting.



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