



FROZEN FOOD AGE

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Extra Special

Staff Writers

Wine-flavored ice creams, sorbets and an expanding organic lineup help fill a key niche in retailers' ice cream sections.

Consumers love their ice cream in all shapes and sizes, but sometimes they need just a little something extra to satisfy that cold "sweet spot." Smart retailers know that. So they keep a special little niche of their ice cream sections open to a handful of hard-to-find flavors or specialty ice creams.

A growing range of these specialty products are traditional flavors made organically or a whole new taste spectrum like sorbets and ice creams that feature wine-infused flavors.

The organic ice cream movement first came to the fore with brands like Julie's Organic from Oregon Ice Cream Co., Eugene, Ore., which is solid in pints in natural and organic sections. The company has since launched Alden's, packaged in a family-friendly 48 oz. container.

Regional ice cream makers are getting into the organic act too. Smith Dairy, Orrville, Ohio, recently launched Ruggles Organic Premium Ice Cream in four flavors.

"With the growing consumer demand for organic products, we feel this is a natural," says Penny Baker, director of marketing, Smith Dairy. "In the last 10 years, organic ice cream sales have grown 55%, so we know the future is bright for this line."

Baker says Ruggles organic ice cream is made with ingredients that do not use antibiotics, pesticides, herbicides or fertilizers. The line has four flavors: Cookies and Cream, Vanilla Bean, Blueberries and Cream, and Mint Chocolate Chip. The product is packaged in 1.5-quart containers.

The new organic line is being merchandised by retailers in Smith's market area in Ohio and surrounding states in both the ice cream section of the frozen food departments and in the organic food sections.

"We are finding by a 4 to 1 ratio that the products are selling better when stocked in the ice cream section," says Baker. "But we are pleased with the results and acceptance of retailers having in both areas of the store."

Smith earned its organic certification for its Ruggles organic line from the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association, which is certified organic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Besides maintaining a separate source of organic cream and other organic ingredients for the organic line, Smith must separate production. "All of the raw materials are separated and segregated from ingredients for our regular ice cream," says Baker, "and it's the same with allergens, and then we have a separate production day specifically for the organic line-isolating it in the plant."

Ice Cream with a Kick

While organic is a popular trend among ice cream makers-as are the various "light" and "churned" varieties-indulgent ice creams tend to trump all.

Two newer companies are proving that with their wine-infused products. Mercer's Dairy, Boonville, N.Y., has developed a line of premium ice creams made with wine in four flavors, or in this case, varietals. Wine Cellars Sorbet, Brooklyn, N.Y., has taken the same approach with its wine-flavored sorbets.

Mercer's Dairy has been making ice cream in the Black River Valley of New York state (west of the Adirondacks) since the 1950s, but five years ago it was purchased by a group of area dairy farmers.

"We were a dairy farm doing fluid milk for 60 years," says Roxaina Hurlburt, who owned one of the nine dairy farm families from Lewis and Jefferson counties that joined together as Quality Dairy Farms to purchase Mercer's. The idea was to move away from the cows-and-farming side of the dairy industry and to ice cream production and distribution.

Mercer's is a co-packer for a number of ice cream brands in the Northeast, including 5 Boroughs Ice Cream, Astoria, N.Y. (Queens) in the New York City metropolitan area and it provides product for number of resorts and special venues like the Sagamore resort on Lake George and the Saratoga Performing Arts Center in upstate New York.

The idea to blend wine with premium ice cream was Hurlburt's "brainstorm" and she was duly appointed by the group as director of marketing. Two years ago Mercer's launched Wine Ice Cream in four flavors: Ala Port, Peach White Zinfandel, Red Raspberry Chardonnay, and Royal White Riesling.

"Wine Ice Cream is a 12% cream product and up to 5% alcohol by volume," explains Hurlburt, "and because it contains alcohol, it can only be purchased by someone 21 years of age or older."

Wine Ice Cream is available in 5-gallon, 5-quart and pint containers. Mercer's recently debuted a new packaging design that features a half-filled glass of wine in a color appropriate to the flavor, with a matching color band at the bottom of the package: dark red for Ala Port, a bright red for Red Raspberry Chardonnay, light green for Royal White Riesling, and peach for Peach White Zinfandel.

Mercer's featured Wine Ice Cream at the Fancy Food Show held in the Javits Center in New York in July. The previous month, it was named Best New Product winner in the "Small Bite Big Taste" competition at the Great American Dessert Expo in Atlanta.

Wine Ice Cream is currently available in the New York area in Wegmans and Whole Foods. The product is also distributed out of Charlotte to North and South Carolina and out of St. Louis in Missouri.

Hurlburt says the next step is to expand distribution to the West Coast and to Florida.

New York State of Mind

Wine Cellar Sorbet gave New York a strong showing at the Fancy Food Show in Manhattan with its new line of wine-flavored sorbets. "We are the first and only producer of a true varietal win sorbet," says Bret Birnbaum, president and founder. "Our mission is to produce the finest quality sorbets made from finished wines around the world."

Wine Cellar Sorbet initially rolled out six flavors: Champagne, Riesling, Rosé, Sangria Rojo, Pinot Noir and Cabernet Sauvignon. But the product lineup will shift according to the season and wine availability, says Birnbaum. "We'll be adding a White Zinfandel and Chianti."

The packaging features a distinctive wine glass applicable to the variety and flavor wine-and-sorbet-a flute for champagne, a fuller glass for Riesling and rosé, a narrower glass for pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon, and a

pitcher for sangria.

Each flavor is also emblazoned across the front of the package and on the front of the plastic lid in a sophisticated graphic. Each flavor has its own distinct packaging color too.

Wine Cellar Sorbet is packaged eight pints to a case. Suggested retail price for each pint is \$6.99. The product is also available in a 5-quart container for foodservice.

Wine Cellar Sorbet is currently available in Whole Foods in the New York metropolitan area-Manhattan, Long Island, Westchester, New Jersey and Connecticut-in addition to specialty retailers in the area, such as Dean & DeLuca, Eli's, Grace's Market and Garden of Eden. The products will soon be available in Food Emporium and D'Agostino, two supermarket chains operating in New York City.

Birnbaum is looking to expand to the West Coast. "We don't use a co-packer. Our sorbet is made right here in our facility in Greenpoint [in Brooklyn]," he says. "So getting our product into West Coast markets will either require transportation and distribution to the West Coast or establishing facilities there."



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