

Mediterranean Foods Still A Category Leader

Interest in healthy regional cuisine is growing

BY BOB JOHNSON

Mediterranean remains a key area of the deli, and one reason is the foods, while delicious and good for you, are also often associated with Old World local culinary traditions going back centuries.

Many of the most familiar items have names that include a town or region that have become familiar to the mainstream largely through the deli.

“Parmigiano Reggiano and Pecorino Romano are still our strongest selling items

in the cheese category; Prosciutto di Parma and Prosciutto di San Daniele in the cured meats category; seafood salad and octopus salad in the seafood category and Kalamata, Cerignola and Castelvetro in the olive category,” says Joe Macaluso, buyer at Musco Food, Maspeth, NY, as he recounts the staples.

Musco is a 93-year-old family-owned and run importer that started with a handful of Italian cured meats and cheeses, but now possesses a product portfolio of 1,600 items from around the world.

“In general, we feel that Mediterranean cuisine offers so many options, since it encompasses so many countries and regions within these countries,” says Macaluso. “Each has their own unique individual culture, traditions and cuisine, not to mention the varieties of the raw products. As an example, the olives from Sicily are much different than those grown in Apuli. Therefore, the olive oil is different and even the dishes prepared with these oils are, therefore, affected.”

While many Mediterranean foods come



with stories going back centuries, one Middle Eastern enterprise offers a line of products that are in high demand.

“The story behind our products has become more attractive; Arab and Jewish women in Israel working together to build bridges and create social impact on their societies,” says Hadas Lahav, who serves as CEO at Sindyanna of Galilee. “International awards for our olive oils, including ‘one of the 100 top olive oils in the world’ in Evoleum 2018, have placed Sindyanna’s olive oil among the best and most premium olive oil on the shelves.”

Sindyanna sells its prize-winning olive oils, herb mixes and honey through Amazon, Fairway Markets and fair trade groups, like Ten Thousand Villages and Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soap.

Interest in foods and flavors from intriguing locales around the world, including the Mediterranean, continues to gain traction in the deli.

“There is an influx of unique flavors within the snacking segment, representing the growing multicultural influence,” according to the Madison, WI-based International Dairy Deli Bakery Association’s (IDDBA) *What’s in Store 2018*. “Innovative flavors like lamb Feta or pineapple curry incorporate popular concepts from both Mediterranean- and

Asian-inspired cuisine.”

The supermarket deli does well to offer enough variety in the Mediterranean program to give consumers choices in both flavors and localities.

“Within our offerings, we have a wide range of flavors and textures that are suitable for a multitude of applications—eaten alone, mixed into recipes, atop pizza or on sandwiches and paninis,” advises Macaluso. “We’ve seen an increase of sales and popularity of mortadella, which once was considered ethnic Italian and is now being received by a broader customer base. Certainly the quality of the product and the recipe of spices used is very important to that success. We carry several brands, including Levoni, Negroni and, of course, Vantia, each having a unique recipe and flavor profile.”

The Olive Bar Anchor

A well-stocked self-service olive bar continues to serve as the gateway to deli Mediterranean food programs.

“Olive bars are still the number one way to merchandise and gain the largest weekly sales,” says Giuliana Pozzuto, director of marketing at DeLallo Foods, based in Jeanette, PA. “However, to reach a broader audience, we have created more ways to merchandise olive bars and fix-

tures within a smaller footprint—this, of course, needs to be relevant to today’s smaller store formats. Still, the olive bars are king and continue to help drive specialty cheese sales.”

George DeLallo began selling Italian grocery items door-to-door in immigrant neighborhoods of Western Pennsylvania in the 1940s and established the grocery store in Jeanette with his wife Madeline in 1954.

The store grew to become national supplier DeLallo Foods, and along the way pioneered in the development of the olive and antipasti bar as a staple in U.S. delis.

“The olive bar encourages customers to try new things and be more adventurous,” says Pozzuto. “The best way to offer up their favorite Mediterranean goodies is on a supermarket deli’s self-service olive bar with the addition of olives and antipasti packaged in-line with specialty cheeses. The packaged items are vital for the grab-and-go consumer who might also need a little pairing inspiration that can be best accomplished via cross merchandising.”

Some suppliers see, along with continued popularity of the olive bar, increased potential for packaged versions of higher end olives.

“As we see a change in consumer demands, we will soon offer a comprehensive selection of Mediterranean olives in a



pre-packed/shelf-stable format under the Vantia brand,” says Macaluso. “Olive bars and olives sold from behind the glass in the deli are certainly still popular. In addition, we also offer a range of jarred olives under the Vantia brand, Italian olives and Iliada Greek olives, brands.”

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“With the overall increase in the popularity of Mediterranean cuisine, olives and antipasti are at the top of their game,” says Pozzuto. “As experts in the category, we are constantly innovating the Mediterranean food items in our olive and antipasti programs for both self-service bars and packaged goods. By studying consumer trends and monitoring the social media buzz, we have in-depth insight into what consumers are after. In response to trending world flavors and dynamic cuisines, we are exploring more regional-specific flavors and recipes, focusing on unique spices for single olive varieties and new antipasto salads with unique value-added components.”

Variety Spices the Section

There are certain items that any well-stocked deli must always have in its Mediterranean section.

“Staple items include olives, cheeses, marinated vegetables like artichokes and peppers, cured meats and more,” says Pozzuto. “We make it easy to cross merchandise antipasti items with deli complements by packaging over 36 of our top-selling items in our SQF-certified USA facility. These grab-and-go solutions are ready to sell, no labor required, for repackaging at the store level. For example, we include specialty meze items like our stuffed grape leaves and seasoned Kalamata olives, items that are ready to pair up with classics like Feta and Kasserli from the deli’s specialty cheese case. Retailers can showcase them for simple pairing inspiration or as gourmet accompaniments to cheese boards and charcuterie plates.”

While high-quality standard items are always important, new and exciting offerings keep Mediterranean adventurous.

“There are always new and exciting developments regarding products from the Mediterranean,” says Macaluso. “We are launching several varieties of pitted olives—Cerignola from Italy, Atlas from Greece and Domat from Turkey, each with a different and unique flavor profile. We will also offer pre-sliced coppa piacentina,

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which is the most recent deli meat permissible to import from Italy. We are anticipating the launch of the Veroni Italian panini sandwich, which uses authentic focaccia from Naples, Italy.”

Meats from old and interesting places can be a magnet for the entire deli Mediterranean section.

“We sell a tremendous variety and volume of deli meats that are imported from Italy and Spain,” says Macaluso. “Prosciutto di Parma, Prosciutto di San Daniele, culatello, prosciutto cotto, mortadella, smoked pancetta, various regional salami and speck, all from Italy. Serrano ham and chorizo from Spain are certainly great selling items for us.”

In addition to olive oil from Galilee, Sindyanna also offers crafted honey and herb products from the region.

“Sindyanna’s zaatar mix is drawing interest all over the world,” says Lahav. “Grown in the Galilee and mixed in Sindyanna’s warehouse, our zaatar herb mix is loved by growing circles of foodies.”

Future Possibilities

Some suppliers see possibilities for Mediterranean foods that offer a broader range of flavor profiles.

“It appears hot and spicy, which was often associated with other cuisines, are now being associated with certain regions within the Mediterranean,” says Macaluso. “We have seen sales increase in our red pepper primo sale. We will soon introduce moliterno pepato, black peppercorns from Central Formaggi, and they will begin producing moliterno peperoncino, red Calabrian pepper, soon. Strong and vibrant flavors are also popular, such as truffle and wine infused.”

One reason to be optimistic about the future of the Mediterranean section is that these foods seem to have gained traction among the next generation of consumers.

“Who doesn’t love Mediterranean food? Though everyone seems to really enjoy olives and antipasti, Millennials are a demographic that really drives the spike in popularity these days,” says Pozzuto. “They are interested in unique spices and truly ethnic flavors from all over the world. A simple pitted olive amps up the excitement when it’s marinated in an authentic spice with a food story to tell. For the Millennial, olives and antipasti are more than snacking and entertaining items, they have made the olive bar a destination for upgrading grain bowls and grain salads, pasta dishes, kale salads and more. Our social media is rich with these types of recipes, and we have tons of engagement when we post these topics.”

Creative Displays

When creatively displayed, the variety of foods from different locales on the Mediterranean can create a unique destination within the market.

“These foods can stand alone in their respective departments based on their categories or as we often suggest in the ‘Mediterranean Store within a Store’ concept for supermarket chains,” advises Macaluso. “We feel these products reach nearly every demographic, since there is something for everyone. Let’s use cheese as an example; we have a wide variety of cheeses for nearly every flavor profile. Italian cheeses, as an example, are usually considered strong, sharp and flavorful, which often are well-received by a more mature consumer who might appreciate pairing these cheeses with wines, yet we sell a cheese called primo sale, which is not well known in the general trade, yet is the perfect introduction of Italian cheeses to the younger consumer. It has a smooth, milky flavor that is great as a snack. I predict primo sale is now ready to make its way into the mainstream supermarkets.” **DB**