

Opportunities For Selling Fresh Herbs

Ethnic shoppers and upscale home chefs are two groups to go after.

BY KRISTI JOHNSON

In an increasingly complicated ethnic marketplace, retailers are finding the potential in marketing fresh herbs to an ethnic clientele and to those wanting to add fresh flavors to their home-cooked meals.

"The secret to successful herb sales is to feature a fresh herb with two to three other produce items in a recipe that is ethnic in nature. Keep it simple to produce and you've made ethnic cooking available to everyone," says Kirk Schmidt, president of Quail Mountain Herbs in Watsonville, CA.

With an ethnic market that is projected to capture one out of every seven new food dollars spent over the next decade, it is no wonder that retailers find this emerging market poses numerous challenges and opportunities. Studies show that recent immigrants to the United States assimilate into a culture over time, but that their native eating habits and foods are held onto the longest.

According to Robin Sporn, department manager for herbs with Agrexco, an Israeli herb importer based in Jamaica, NY, "The usage of herbs is influenced by, but not limited to, ethnic groups, as well as the type of meal being prepared."

Mike Murphy, director of national retail sales for HerbThyme Farms in San Diego, CA, believes that fresh herbs have come a long way, from a specialty category to a destination category. "Consumer interest is more focused now on fresh herbs than ever before," says Murphy. "HerbThyme recognizes that there is strong demand for fresh herbs in Hispanic communities and is developing product lines and label-

ing to satisfy this demand."

EATING IN

Unfavorable economic reports and terrorist activities have not kept Americans away from restaurants and 'eating out.' But while Americans spent over \$373 billion on food away from home in 2002, the family meal is far from extinct. A recent survey by Contadina Foods found that families still find eating together an essential tool in building family relationships. Important elements to spending time together is knowing how to use fresh herbs to create a flavorful meal and finding ways to cut meal-preparation time. Herb packaging with recipes and usage information is assisting the consumer.

Rock Garden South, in Miami, FL, with a line of 8 different fresh herb blends, believes that simplifying the seasoning process expedites meal-preparation time. Rock Garden's president Charlie Coiner says, "Our blends give consumer chefs the opportunity to experiment with various flavors on the meat or seafood of their choice, and they end up with a simple and flavorful dish, while spending less time in the kitchen."

"We're seeing an increase in home cooking since September 11, 2001," says Quail Mountain's Schmidt. "The change in the economic condition has people spending more time at home and with family."

As consumer food demands change, experts are noting that the trends point to more weekend cooking and more dinner parties. Rock Garden's Coiner comments, "By marrying fresh herbs with the specialty and ethnic produce at retail, we've found sales of complementary items increase dramatically closer to the weekend." Although entertaining has become more casual than in the past, taste, healthiness and environmental friendliness seem to be key issues for consumers.

Fueling the fire are chefs who continue to lead the trends by requesting the cleanest and healthiest herbs for their customers. "With all the new cooking shows on TV, there is a bigger trend and awareness

