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The Reinvented Deli

The deli has become the focus for how supermarkets compete with the foodservice business — estimated at close to \$70 billion in Canada — and retailers are showing a lot of innovation these days to help capture that market.

Indeed, contends Colin Johnston, meat/deli/seafood program manager at Quality Foods, “The in-store deli is fast becoming an alternative to the foodservice industry. A deli with all its resources

right inside its own supermarket can prepare quality meal alternatives to the restaurant industry.” At his store, like so many of his contemporaries, the regular service of breakfast and lunch is standard. For the evening, they’ve recently embarked on an “authentic Italian pizza program” offering scratch-made crust topped with kitchen-tested ingredients.

The renewed attention and burst of innovation, come from dual forces shap-

ing our retail landscape of late: The influx of immigrants who bring their particular ethnic tastes with them on the journey, and the popularity of cooking shows that back up their celebration of exotic cuisine with easy-to-follow counsel on their preparation.

“The deli today has a lot more of an international flair than a decade ago,” says Doris Valade, president of Malabar Super Spice, who points out that the



internet cannot be discounted for its role in this evolution. "If you Google a recipe now on the Web, you get back flavour ideas that you simply would not find in the Joy of Cooking."

All of which is a good thing if you're a grocer with a deli section in-store. This particular block of retail real estate now is fitted out in such exotica as sun-dried tomato, lemongrass, sweet chili, jalapeno peppers, cumin, coriander and a hundred different curries. To say nothing of the cheese.

"Twenty years ago," says Steven Gettis, sales manager at Bothwell Cheese, "you just had a glass counter with cheeses. Now you've got this vast bunker of cheeses and meats from around the world, along with prepared products. It's a dramatic change." And the drama continues with the addition of novelty here. Bothwell, celebrating its 75th birthday this year, has recently introduced Muenster to its expanding line of specialty cheeses. Now, alongside the smoked, jalapeno, black truffle and red pepper cheeses, find this smooth-textured German white cheese with an orange rind.

"We saw a gap in the marketplace," says Gettis, "and we've seen great uptake



Quality Foods deli focuses on theatre and freshness.

burden of long management chains, have put on a good show here, the great bulk of the bigger guys seem to have gotten stuck in a landscape of ham and salami. In a perfect world, she believes, a deli should be a work of art, an edible display of vivid colour and rich variety that's an irresistible invitation to shoppers. Too often, she says, deli managers take the easy route and presentation is overlooked. "They just put these rolls of sausages in rows in the counter."

by the consumer." It's for this reason and others, he believes, that delis are the bomb from a retail point of view right now. "Managers are now able to put out a premium product and charge a premium price for it. Before, profitability was not so evident here."

A central part of the philosophy shaping Quality Foods' deli operations is a focus on theatre and freshness, says Johnston, whose Quality Foods banner waves at 11 award-winning stores on B.C.'s Vancouver Island and Sunshine Coast. Rather than go the labour-saving route and import finished products from an outside manufacturer, the team here looks to prepare as many of their foods fresh in each store as possible. It involves a greater number of employees, to say nothing of training hours, says Johnston, but it's a choice they purposefully make. "One of the key benefits to preparing foods in each store is the activity it creates. By having more people in the department employed, those staff members are also available to provide additional customer service at busy times." Further, he adds, staffers enjoy learning how to prepare different foods, thus enhancing their sense of accomplishment and contribution.

"Delis can and should be exciting," Johnston enthuses. "They should offer customers an experience. [Retailers] shouldn't be afraid to try things that are way out there. Customers generally appreciate the chance to try something new and unusual. And, even if the first nine tries don't work, the tenth just might, and you may have just discovered the next Big Thing."

Just the same, Valade laments, "I don't think retailers are responding to these opportunities [well] enough." While some smaller operations, without the



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Merchandising Tips

Separate cheeses by flavour, advises Bothwell's Gettis, to avoid a disorganized look.

Display product labels the right side up and employ signage to suggest wine or food pairings. Keeping a selection of event-planning guides/appetizer cook-books on hand in this section enables the customer to visualize their ultimate destination.

Cross-promoting with complementary items like crackers, bread, nuts, and crisp and juicy fruits (Bosc or Bartlett pears or in-season apples are a good bet) help increase the basket size and total at the till.

Sticking with Spice

One of the things they noticed at Malabar Super Spice, a Burlington, Ont.-based seasoning company, is that too many in-store marinades—prepared with water and oil—have no traction on the food product. They run to the bottom of the tray and don't look nearly as good as they could (to say nothing of their taste). Malabar has just introduced a full line of ready-to-use liquid marinades, from German manufacturer Raps. With exotic handles like Marifix Toskana and Marinox Mexico, these marvels are pasteurized and, better still, thick enough to adhere to the product.

Overseas Cheese

All of Bothwell's products are 100% natural, made from locally-sourced milk, and free from additives and preservatives.

In September, the New Bothwell, Manitoba-based company introduced a new cheese to its specialty line — Bothwell Muenster. This strong-tasting, soft cheese is easy to melt, and so can find endless application back home in a deli shopper's kitchen.



Delis are showing a lot of innovation and capturing a new market.

A deli should offer customers an experience.

increasingly suffering food sensitivities can prove a boon to a clever retail deli manager.

All of the effort, Valade reassures, will be worth the time and money. "People buy with their eyes," she says. "And those [great supermarket] delis, you're not going to find in a Shoppers Drug Mart counter. You're not going to find in a Wal-Mart counter. That's the edge that these supermarkets have, and if they wish to compete with the food counters showing up at mass merchandisers, that's how they can differentiate themselves."



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Expanding Meat to Ride the Edge

She predicts that fresh, marinated meat products represent the biggest area of growth for this department in coming years, and is excited at the opportunity waiting to be exploited here. Canadian retailers might take a page from the books of their European counterparts. Overseas, supermarket delis fairly sing with meats — marinated, rolled-up, stuffed and skewered. As they don't have the same kind of apprentice programs that sustain this kind of activity in Europe, Canadian retailers need to be resourceful. Tapping immigrants' knowledge on this front is essential. They might also import specialized help from elsewhere in the form, say, of master sausage makers.

Another opportunity for which the experts predict growth is the prepackaged deli area. Currently saddled with a reputation for boring, limited presentation, this collection of prepackaged cold cuts and cheeses could be dramatically expanded in many stores, and made more interesting with enhanced selection. Think about the current trend towards natural meats and allergen- and gluten-free products, experts urge. A population

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