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Notes after noshing – from the desktop of:

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Innovation continues among smaller consumer product companies ...

NASFT, the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade Inc., hosts three annual trade shows – January in San Francisco, May in Chicago, and July in New York City. Exhibiting at the show were ~ 2,300 companies showcasing tens of thousands of specialty products. The following are some highlights of the show.

Gourmet foods from small companies abound. Unfortunately, in many categories, the product offerings and brands blur together.

- Among the most prevalent items at the show are specialty cheeses, oils, olives, and chocolates. Very tasty, but sometimes the offerings are not very differentiated.

Beverages, and teas in particular, are still hot.

- Tremendous innovation with powerful imagery and branding among tea providers –loose teas, bagged teas, ready-to-drink teas, and tea-inspired drinks. Among the most exciting are:
 - ✓ *Republic of Tea* – featuring their partnership with *The Nature Conservancy* and their new *Earth Team Collection* – indigenous, naturally caffeine-free herbs, fruits, flowers, and spices from diverse bioregions around the world – with flavors like *Alpine Flowers Tea* and *Desert Sage Tea*. 
 - ✓ *Numi Teas and Teasans* – showcases their distinct selections to awaken the palate. Brought to market originally in 1999 by an Oakland, CA-based brother and sister team, they recently claimed the position of fastest growing natural channel brand among the top 15 tea companies. Introduced several new hot tea blends such as *Moonlight Spice* and new organic chai concentrates. Great tasting blends!
 - ✓ *Steap* – recently expanded nationally, these certified organic micro-brewed soft drinks made with green tea were rated 2003 most unique new product by Beverage Industry Magazine. *Steap* sodas are made with 100% natural ingredients and come in traditional soft drink flavors, like Cola, Root Beer, Orange, Raspberry, and Lemon Dew – each with a hint of tea flavor. Delicious! Plus, each bottle has the same antioxidant health benefits of a cup of green tea. 
 - ✓ *Honest Tea* – building on the success of ready-to-drink teas that made them the largest brand in the natural food channel, *Honest Tea* completes its roll-out of bagged teas containing organic whole leaf teas – not ground teas as is more common among conventional tea bag brands.
 - ✓ *Oregon Chai* – as announced at Natural Products *Expo West* in March, Oregon Chai was preparing to launch ready-to-drink chai tea lattes. They're here now and will be a huge hit. 
- There were many new entrants to the sparkling fruit juice category. Present at the show were *Kristall* and *Fizzy Lizzy* to name a few. These entrants join non-exhibitors *Izze* (natural channel) and *NectarFizz*, the 800-pound gorilla in the space from Snapple Beverage Group's *Nantucket Nectars* brand.
- *Kahlua Cappuccino Shakers* – a new non-alcoholic ready-to-drink beverage distributed by *Arizona*. Clever!

Asian foods are everywhere.

- Market leader *Thai Kitchen* continues to expand its line. But the bigger news for them and the category is that their *Simply Asia* line is selling well and being expanded. *Simply Asia* branches out into great tasting meals, ready in 10 minutes, originating primarily from Japan and China.
- *Annie Chun's* meal kits and soups (featured in *Parade Magazine's* annual *What America Eats* issue) and *Lee Kum Lee* (mostly sauces) had strong presences. Lots of sampling at these booths!



And, many other interesting products ...

- Pita Products LLC, that brought us the pillow-shaped *Pita-Snax* oven-baked snack food, is extending into *Pita-Snax Pita Chips*. A mainstream-ish version of pita chips you might find in a restaurant – but *Doritos* shaped snacks in bags. Delicious, light not greasy, and full of crunch.
- *Manischewitz* showcased their new *Noshables* line of all-natural tortilla chips, all-natural ready-to-eat popcorn, and low-fat caramel corns. The strawberry caramel corn was most unique.
- *FoodDoodler*, showcased briefly at the Chicago Fancy Food Show in May, made a bigger splash with a full line of color & eat cookies. Key will be determining if their patent will protect against future imitations.
- Interesting flavor innovations on large mainstream categories. Two noteworthy mentions were *Peanut Better* (with both savory and sweet peanut butters) and *Ketchup World* (a e-tailer and private labeler of flavored ketchups).
- The team at Alexia Foods, who previously brought us Terra Chips before selling them to Hain, extends the *Alexia* brand from the multi-colored flavored and seasoned frozen french fries introduced at other trade shows to flavored and well-seasoned frozen mashed potatoes. Another winner. The shelf presence is terrific ... and the flavors even better!
- *Char Crust* and *Rub with Love*, two of the leaders in the small but growing dry-rub seasoning category continue to have some of the best products and packaging in the food industry. Try 'em!
- Several new retail products from our favorite chefs – *Emeril's* (new BBQ sauce, rubs, etc.) and Rick Bayless' *Frontera Foods* (new *Cuadritos* – four flavors of bite-sized all-natural corn snacks). Crunch!
- *Niman Ranch*, a premium naturally raised pork brand that successfully extended into other meats, showcased their partnership east of the Mississippi with *D'Artagnan*, a NJ-based leading premium purveyor of duck and other game/poultry items. *Niman Ranch* has built a large following in major metros with chefs who have branded the ingredient on menus and *Niman Ranch* is now extending into value-added products at retail.
- Interesting new product brought to the US from Canada: the *Baro Café* system “fresh brews” coffee without the brewing machine. Complete with inverted filter as the lid and premium ground coffee/sweetener/stirrer, just add hot water from the home tea-kettle or office hot water dispensing cooler. The coffee “brews” right into its own disposable coffee cup.
- The *Jelly Belly* folks are at it again. Following on their recent introduction of *JBz* (*Jelly Belly* flavors outside with milk chocolate center), watch for *JB Gum* to come to retail. In bulk packs only for now.
- Most humorous names: *Trailer Trash* snack mix and *Fudge Fatale* (the “chocolates to die for”).



Hope these thoughts are helpful. Any questions? Call or email me.

Andy