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Indian Flavors Make an Impact at Fancy Food Show

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SAN FRANCISCO — Americans love Indian food, but most of them have no clue how to make it. That's good news to Indian food manufacturers, who are seeing their products enjoy robust growth in the marketplace despite the rocky economy.

Over a dozen Indian and Indian American food manufacturers and distributors joined more than 16,000 gourmet food buyers and purveyors at the Winter Fancy Food Show Jan. 17-19, a yearly event organized by the influential National Association for the Specialty Food Trade.



"We feel Indian food is really growing in popularity," Louise Kramer, communications director for the NASFT, told India-West. "There's a barrier to entry for a lot of home cooks to Indian food. So the techniques, ingredients and spices offer a real opportunity for specialty food manufacturers to step up."

The show, which was only open to the food trade, offered a mind-boggling (and waistband-expanding) 80,000 specialty foods and beverages from 1,250 exhibitors from 45 countries. There were dozens of French cheeses; artisanal and organic fruit sodas; deluxe chocolates studded with everything from bacon to chilis; salsas; snacks; jams; chips and oddities such as gourmet caramels made with goat milk. Buyers from Whole Foods Markets, Williams-Sonoma, Amazon.com, Trader Joes and other shops scouted for new trends and tastes.

One of the hottest companies at the show was Sukhi's Gourmet Indian Foods, headed by the energetic Sukhi Singh of Hayward, Calif. Sukhi's Samosa with Cilantro Chutney frozen appetizer won the NASFT's coveted Sofi Gold award for outstanding frozen savory item.

"We're at the right time, in the right place," grinned Singh, as she greeted buyers and browsers at her sprawling booth, in front of a shelf full of food industry awards and samples of the award winning chicken samosas, chutneys and hot curries.

A winner of the Sofi Award for the second year in a row, Singh has been selling her sauces, samosas and other treats in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1992. Recently, Singh's children also left high-profile jobs with Adobe and eBay to join their mother and help her grow the business.

"Most of our customers are mainstream — and that includes yuppie Indians," said Singh, who also recently launched a line called Sukhi's Lean Fare, low-fat and low-calorie, all-natural versions of Chicken Tikka Masala, Dal Saag and Chicken Jalfrezi.

Another Indian line of products that drew a crowd was Deep Foods, a company based in New Jersey that makes eight distinct frozen and shelf-stable brands that each cater to a different segment of the population, such as Gujarati (Bhagwati's), South Indian (Udupi) and mainstream American (Tandoor Chef). Deep's Tandoor Chef brand makes an Indian dinner for two, now on sale at Costco — Chicken Tikka Masala, Dal Makhni, chutney and naan. "We want to give a restaurant experience to our customers," said Chet Trivedi, Deep Food's director of sales.

"Indians are the core of our business," Mike Ryan, Deep Food's vice president of marketing, told India-West. "That's why we are always innovating, by introducing regional products or by changing the tastes of our current products." It is in this spirit that the company has just launched a line of Naan Pizzas in four flavors: roasted eggplant, cilantro pesto, Margherita, and spinach and paneer.

Another company that aims to broaden the palates of its customers is Stonehouse 27, a company founded by Sharon Fernandes, who grew up in a Christian household in Mumbai and mines the city's Portuguese background for innovative ideas in cooking sauces.

Stonehouse 27 earned raves at the show for its date, tamarind and roasted chili cooking sauce, sweetened with agave. Their line of gourmet sauces are the only Indian-influenced product to use low-glycemic agave nectar as a sweetener.

"They do not have agave in India, but that's why the food I cook is so unique, capturing the best of East and West," Fernandes told India-West in an e-mail. Stonehouse 27 sauces will soon be available at the Pasta Shop, an upscale retailer in Oakland's Rockridge shopping district.

Stonehouse 27's success is a sign that customers are now learning to be more discriminating in their tastes.

"Being at the winter Fancy Food show helped us launch on the West Coast and increase our brand awareness and distribution. The response from the high calibre of attendees who sampled our sauces reaffirmed that people are looking for unique and healthy ethnic [cuisine]," said Fernandes.

"There's more of a hunger as their tastes get more sophisticated, and there's more interest in flavors," added the NAFST's Louise Kramer.

Spicy Nothings, a San Diego company that makes four simmer sauces (Korma, Vindaloo, Madras and Saag), relies strictly on natural ingredients, with no artificial preservatives, colors or enhancers. "Within 18 months, we've grown from nothing to having the sauces in 80 Whole Foods Markets," company founder Arobind Velagapudi told India-West.

There were several tea companies at the show — the Tea Board of India brought five tea companies from regions such as Darjeeling, Assam and the Nilgiri mountains in Tamil Nadu — and several spice purveyors such as Pax Spices & Labs Inc., a company from Baldwin Park, Calif., founded by Kerala-born Tom Tharayil.

Other attendees at the show were just there in search of the Next Big Thing — like retailer Kumar Jawa of India Sweets and Spices of Glendale, Calif. — or to scope out the competition, like Deepa Shenoy of Pul Foods, a maker of soy-free snacks made from lentils, dry beans and peas and other pulses.

Specialty food, such as the Indian food on display at the Fancy Food Show, accounts for 15.9 percent of all retail food sales, and the total specialty food industry, including sales to food service, was \$60 billion, according to the NASFT. Around \$2.2 billion of that is the ethnic food market, of which Indian food earns \$40 million. Although Indian food's segment is still far less than Mexican food (\$1.4 billion), the Associated Press reports that a study released in September 2009 by Mintel, a market research group, found that the fastest growing segment was Indian food, with sales increasing nearly 35 percent from 2006 to 2008. The Mintel study also says the Asian (mostly Chinese) and Indian food segments are driving that growth.

Four years ago, chai was largely unheard of here in the United States, and now one can pick up a hot cup of the stuff (or its Americanized version, anyway) at every corner coffee shop.

The Fancy Food Show is one of the best places to spy what is going to be hot in the months and years ahead. Indian food may have been slow to catch on, but it seems to have staked its claim to a spot at America's table.