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# Candy & Snack TODAY

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## LOVE OF CARAMEL

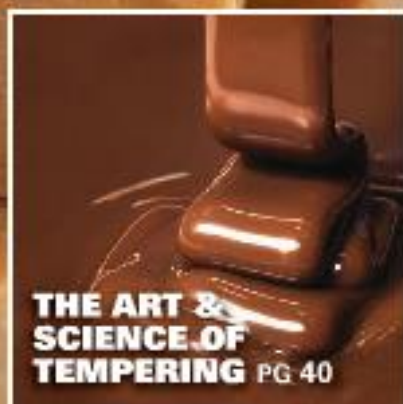
Flavor and formula innovations are creating excitement in this classic chewy candy sub segment. PG 22



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**Offering new eating experiences and occasions for classic items, thin snacks are on trend with shoppers and on-track to lifting sales.**

## Slim Profile, Robust Sales

FROM SWEET TO SAVORY, thin is in for snack suppliers as products formulated to deliver a lighter eating experience have been gaining traction at retail and with consumers.

The trend really kicked into high gear about 18 months ago, right before the holidays, according to Pete Thomsen, director of sales and strategy for Sugar Bowl Bakery. "When I initially joined the company, we were having that conversation about the role of thin and whether people would buy it," he says. The results of those early meetings were Cake Batter Cookie Crisps, which rolled out at this year's Sweets & Snacks Expo.

In addition to sweet items, thinner versions of salty snacks, crackers and breads have proven successful, according to Eric Van De Wal, vice-president of marketing and innovations at Clearview Foods, a division of Snyder's-Lance, Inc., makers of Snack Factory Pretzel Crisps.

"When you talk with consumers about what they like about thin versions of popular snacks, they often speak of the benefits of getting great flavor and a crunchy eating experience without having to consume as much product," he adds.

For Salem Baking Co., thin is nothing new. Company President Brooke Smith tells **Candy & Snack TODAY** the cookie maker had been offering thin items for decades, but admits they are resonating strongly in today's marketplace.

She explains part of the appeal is simple, high-quality ingredients. "Bakers can't skimp when it comes to thin. You can't hide anything about what's in thin cookies," Smith says.

Although not absolutely new, they did prompt fresh thinking in some segments. "Part of our success was because there hadn't been anything really new in brownies for a very long time," says Brownie Brittle, LLC Founder and CEO Sheila G. Mains. "If you remember, the two-

bite brownie was popular for a long time, but that was it for brownies in the snack category."

In addition to bringing significant innovation to the category, the success was further driven by word of mouth. "We knew once people tried it, they'd like it and come back and buy more," she explains. "Our consumers who do love it, love to share it with friends. That helped get the product some traction."

Aiming to capture adult consumers who grew up eating Oreos, Mondelez International, Inc. introduced a thin version of the legacy brand, offering a more "grown-up eating experience," according to Patty Gonzalez, senior brand manager.

"They're close to half the thickness of regular Oreo cookies, but still deliver the classic taste," she explains.

For the overall market, the appeal lies in something familiar to those working in the confectionery and snack space: bite-size and hand-to-mouth snacking trends, according to

Joan Steuer, president of Chocolate Marketing, LLC. "Thin snack products are analogous to chocolate bites, and texturally, nearly the equivalent of a chip," she explains. "In the case of thins, they are crispy, crunchy and

***'In the case of thins, they are crispy, crunchy and light, and are perceived "better-for-you."***

**JOAN STEUER**  
Chocolate Marketing, LLC

light, and are perceived 'better-for-you.'"

"The thin trend for snacks and bite-size in confections go hand in hand," agrees Kimberlee Ullner, founder and president of 1-2-3 Gluten Free, makers of Gourmet Brownie Chips.

"People are looking for full flavor, but limited calories. Consumers want to have their indulgences, but they also want to maintain control of them."

She adds that it is almost a psychological appeal to consumers who really like thin snacks. "There's a perception that the item will be



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*'People are looking for full flavor, but limited calories. Consumers want to have their indulgences, but they also want to maintain control of them.'*

**KIMBERLEE ULLNER**  
1-2-3 Gluten Free

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healthier in some ways."

This "better-for-you" perception was something of a trial for Mondelez, according to Gonzalez.

"One of our biggest challenges in developing a thinner version has been to clearly position the product so that consumers understand these are not meant to be 'diet' cookies," she explains. "They're simply a new twist on the classic cookie, with a different look and feel."

In addition, Steuer says consumers perceive thin products as premium items for everyday. "They're perfectly positioned at the intersection of indulgent treat and better-for-you," she explains.

### THE THIN SNACK'S DILEMMA

While the list of items claiming thin formulations has been growing, with Steuer counting as many as a dozen companies rolling out iterations at the Summer Fancy Food Show and at retail, the subsegment isn't without its challenges.

Among the most pressing is getting consistent flavor throughout the item, according to Thomsen. "It's difficult to do something thin in a dough because it's not completely mixed. There are lumps in it," he explains. To remedy this, the company makes its thin snack products using batter to ensure uniformity.

Consistency was also a challenge faced by Brownie Brittle, according to Mains, explaining the company developed custom equipment to ensure the thickness remained constant from batch to batch. "If they are too thin, they will burn at spots; too thick, and you have areas that never get crisp," she tells **Candy & Snack TODAY**. "The toppings also have to be sturdy enough to hold up under the long baking process."

Salem Baking's Smith notes the company has the luxury of leaning on its 85 years of experience in formulating thin items, divulging the keys are high-quality ingredients and the right recipes. "When reformulating an existing cookie to make it thin, you have to be willing to take that reality into account," she explains. "It's where art and science truly meet to make a

cookie or snack that's not only durable, but also flavorful."

Maintaining integrity from production through shipping is the other big challenge facing manufacturers.

At Sugar Bowl, the items are handled in a "school of fish" approach, according to Thomsen, explaining: "If you try to leave them loose, they'll bang into each other and break, but if you pack them tightly, you're less likely to have significant damage. They are stronger as a crew; that's why we use the pouch. It allows for a better school of fish, much better than a clamshell."

The standup pouch is the preferred pack for Brownie Brittle, too. However, Mains says the film needs to be of adequate thickness and the gusset designed with care. "Our gussets almost make a shelf to protect the bottoms. They're raised up a little and very sturdy," she explains.

### IMPORTANCE OF ON-PACK CUES

In addition to being sturdy enough to protect the product, the packaging should also convey the "thin" message.

While many companies cut to the chase and use words like "crisp," "crunchy" and, of course, "thin," in tag lines, Thomsen reinforces the importance of pictures.

"Words are secondary, and should only reaffirm what we see," he explains, noting actual product shots are a must. "You can't take a picture of something else and hope consumers won't notice. If you aren't using quality content, you'll get burned."

"What they aren't saying is important, too," Steuer notes, explaining words such as "decadent" and "indulgent" aren't used often to promote thin items, as they signal occasional consumption, rather than everyday.

She notes that as the subsegment matures, smaller packs merchandised for grab-and-go occasions will become the next iteration. In addition, Steuer says smaller firms releasing thin snacks are upping the ante for mainstream manufacturers, admitting it won't be easy for larger firms to jump on the trend.

"They have to do something different so they don't cannibalize existing business and





come off as being innovative, instead of being seen as a 'me-too' item," she explains.

To remedy this, she recommends a strategy of launching thin products as limited-time offerings, "which can be particularly strong during the holiday season, leveraging traditional seasonal flavors," she says.

## DEFINING THINS CONSUMERS

The main demographic for these products is a bit of a mixed bag, with some sources citing women as the top purchasers, while others note the adventurist millennials are drawn to the newness of the subsegment.

Steuer explains that women are inclined to buy more thin snacks, while men are more interested in the novelty of the items. "I think it's fascinating for people, particularly the brownie items," she says, continuing: "They're less dense and indulgent. Chewy and fudgy are now crispy and crunchy, and a brownie can be light, giving it that 'wow' and making it a must-try."

When it comes to millennials, Thomsen notes they tend to lean in and take chances with new foods. "They're seeking new flavors and textures, and are highly informed consumers who hear about new food trends because of the technology in their hands," he explains.

"What is interesting is that we see clear lifestyle usage differences, as opposed to life stage differences," explains Van De Wal. "For example, people

who entertain frequently will most often use Pretzel Crisps as a carrier or dipping snack, whereas those consumers who lead an active on-the-go lifestyle will often enjoy the product straight out of the pack."

Although the format is garnering attention from retailers and shoppers alike because of the "newness" factor, building sales still falls to tried-and-true methods, such as off-shelf displays, sampling and merchandising adjacencies.

"You have to find a path to purchase, whether it's in-store or the consumer's home," Thomsen says, adding demos work the best. "If you can get the shopper to try it, and you have a great product, they will become repeat purchasers. More important, they'll tell other people about it."

Steuer notes that as manufacturers move into smaller pack formats, getting placement in delis, bakeries and salad bars will also drive sales.

"It will appeal to those who are getting a sandwich and want something that's light for dessert or an everyday snack," she explains. "Instead of buying a bag of cookies for dessert after a salad, thin snacks are perfect." **CST**

*'Bakers can't skimp when it comes to thin. You can't hide anything about what's in thin cookies.'*

**BROOKE SMITH**  
Salem Baking Co.



## EVEN CHOCOLATE IS GOING THIN

PRODUCTS FORMULATED TO BE SLENDER transcend the snack section, as chocolate manufacturers have taken a cue from the other aisle and have begun rethinking their products.

What was once bark is now thinner and being described as snacking chocolate, and with double-digit sales gains this past year, according to Information Resources, Inc., shoppers seem to be embracing the new moniker.

"Consumers normally snack on chips and put the bag away. We wanted to deliver that same experience in chocolate," says Jim Voelker, sales director for BarkThins. "We're also trying to be on trend with what's going on in the market by using non-GMO and Fair Trade ingredients."

A commitment to quality is the standard-bearer for the emerging subsegment, agrees Brown & Haley COO John Melin, explaining: "It's not about quantity, but the high-quality flavor. When we look at this special product in special packs, we think it's hitting the mark, and we're enthusiastic with the growth in this niche."

The company launched Roca Thins in March, and the peppermint variety won the seasonal category in the Sweets & Snacks Expo's Most Innovative New Product Awards.

Melin says the company initially developed the products to get in on the growing consumption of premium chocolate in small portions as "an everyday luxury."

Noting the subsegment skews heavily toward females, he adds: "She knows, and the market is discovering what she knows: That it's a high-quality chocolate confection that she can have a small piece of and still get the same satisfaction." **CST**

