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print view

Kid-Friendlier Sweets

By VANESSA L. FACENDA

TRICK-OR-TREAT BAGS MAY BE GETTING A MAKEOVER THIS HALLOWEEN. Typical childhood loot made up of Tootsie Rolls®, Jawbreakers® and other sugary sweets are taking a backseat to potentially healthier treats that are organic and natural, made with alternative sweeteners such as brown rice syrup or are fortified with juice.

The Drive for Change

"The confectionery industry," says Jenn Ellek, director of trade marketing and communications, National Confectioners Association, Vienna, Va., "is telling consumers more about their products.

Parents want to know what is sweetening confections, the sugar/sweetener content, what types of additives are being used to color and flavor the candies and what preservatives are being used."

Many people are concerned about artificial dyes—common in candies, sugary cereals and more—which have long been suspected of affecting children's behavior. According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), Americans' exposure to artificial food dyes has risen dramatically—up from 12 milligrams per capita per day in 1955, to 55 milligrams per capita per day in 2007. The Center for Science of Public Interest (CSPI) formally petitioned the FDA in June to ban six dyes: Yellow 5, Yellow 6, Red 3, Red 40, Blue 1, Blue 2, Green 3 and Orange B— all of which have been linked to hyperactivity and behavior problems in children. Several of these dyes are already being phased out in the U.K.

Candy Makeovers

Concerns about added chemicals and dyes are driving parents to shop for more natural candy options. According to the Greenfield, Mass.-based Organic Trade Association, the organic chocolate and candy market grew 28 percent to \$63 million in 2006, up from \$49 million in 2005.

A growing number of suppliers are creating product lines that address health concerns or dietary intolerances. Luna Roth, founder and president of Toronto's Pure Fun, for instance, offers a line of confections that don't contain artificial dyes or flavors; are gluten- and dairy-free; and are all certified organic, kosher and vegan. Roth points out that allergies, particularly food-related ones, have grown dramatically in the past 20 years, and that additives and preservatives in the food chain may be a culprit.

Another manufacturer who has focused on the more-healthy confections market is Elizabeth Begosh, founder of Betty's Tasty Buttons, Philadelphia. Begosh's line of artisan fudge is all natural and uses organic sugar and Fair-Trade chocolate. Ingredients such as honey and herbs are locally sourced when possible.

Other companies are pushing their already successful product lines in an organic and natural direction. "Our Sunny Seed Drops [chocolate-covered sunflower seeds with candy coatings] have recently been approved by schools' wellness programs throughout the country as a healthy snack for kids," notes Rudy Esquivel, CEO of the Lenexa, Kan.-based Sunflower Food Co.

Sunflower also recently created All-Natural Sunny Seed Drops. Among other healthful ingredients, the line uses natural colorings: green comes from spinach juice, paprika is used for orange, turmeric for yellow, purple cabbage for grape and beets for pink. "We have seen a tremendous demand for our natural products and we are focusing on new product development to be all natural," Esquivel continues.

Long-standing brand Jelly Belly, too, is offering new jellybeans made with natural flavors and colors. The Fairfield, Calif.-based manufacturer has begun turning out jelly beans colored in earth tones derived from natural sources of color such as red cabbage juice and grape skins. Flavors include Peach, Lemon, Grape, Plum, Coconut, Cherry and Banana.



Seeking Sweetening Alternatives

"Recently more consumers have been asking about artificial sweeteners such as Splenda and sorbitol—not for diabetic reasons, but because they want to make sure to avoid them because of food allergies," says Doug Alpern, founder of Pittsburgh-based Village Candy. Currently, the shop carries more organic chocolate than organic candy, but notes the growing interest in People Pops, from Golden Apples Candy Co., Southport, Conn.

Deborah Schimberg, president of Glee Gum, Providence, R.I., echoes Alpern's sentiments about artificial sweeteners. "Sugar is not the boogeyman it used to be. There is a lot more concern about artificial sweeteners like aspartame and their health effects, such as digestive problems," she says. Glee Gum is sweetened with cane sugar and rice syrup and contains no artificial colors, flavors, sweeteners or preservatives.

Similarly, Pure Fun's Roth explains that the company's candies—hard candy drops, pinwheels, citrus slices, cotton candy and lollipops—are sweetened primarily with brown rice syrup and evaporated cane sugar and don't have the same so-called rush as refined sugar. In 2009, Pure Fun will introduce organic freezeze pops sweetened with lemon, lime and cherry juices.

Raw sugar may not be an anathema anymore, but some manufacturers like Ridgewood, N.J.-based YummyEarth believe corn syrup is. Rob Wunder, co-founder, explains that his candies are sweetened with organic raw brown sugar, tapioca or rice sugar. The organic lollipops and drops are also gluten-, egg-, dairy-, peanut-, wheat- and soy-free, and flavored with real fruit extracts.

Innovative Candy Concepts in Atlanta has revamped its entire product line to be healthier for children, offering no refined sugars and a 50 percent to 60 percent reduction in calories from the original line, especially appealing as childhood obesity statistics increase. The company's Too Tarts® SmartChoice™ line includes Sour Blast and Super Sweet spray candies, Xtra Sour Goo and Suck Ups, and contains fruit juice concentrates.

Building an Audience

With more consumers requesting healthier candy, retailers can benefit from building out dedicated shelf space to call attention to the category. James Kinard, proprietor of For the Love of Chocolate, Richmond, Va., notes that an increased selection of organic varieties has helped his best-selling chocolate category gain even more momentum. He also points out that upscale chocolate's high-quality ingredient profile appeals to the better-for-you candy consumer. "Finer chocolates are more natural because they are often made with real vanilla and no artificial coloring, and the darker chocolates not only contain antioxidants, but they have now been found to be an anti-cavity food," notes Kinard.

Michael Corsello, senior buyer, Food Emporium, New York, City, carries about 100 brands of organic chocolate such as Dagoba and Divine, and stocks a few organic and natural gummy candies, jelly beans and hard candies. Food Emporium is in the process of aggressively expanding its selection, notes Corsello. "Our goal is to create a baby/toddler/young child section where we can merchandise all of these types of items together," he explains.

However, Kinard cautions that it takes time to build an audience. "Give the products at least a year to catch on." Regarding merchandising, his store has featured items on display and sponsored special events during heart and diabetes awareness months. Suppliers can help, he notes, "If this category is going to progress, manufacturers have to make their products available and especially make the packaging appealing—more colorful, unusual or outrageous."

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