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> Wanted: Cooking Tools

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Nov 10, 2008 12:00 PM, By AMANDA BALTAZAR

Supermarkets are meeting shoppers' economic and holiday needs by promoting the basics in cooking utensils



As the cost of eating out continues to rise, consumers are increasingly bucking the dining-out trend of the past few decades and cooking at home.

The problem is, they are often left not only lacking the knowledge to cook, but also the cookware.

Grocery stores are stepping up to the plate and offering a selection of pots, pans and utensils, especially in the months leading up to the holidays.

“From the consumer's point of view, it provides a more complete solution to their shopping, and for retailers it's an additional sale,” said Ted Taft, managing director of Meridian Consulting, Wilton, Conn.

What customers are looking for, said Marcia Mogelonsky, senior research analyst with Mintel International Group, Chicago, is the basics so they can prepare a simple meal fast, and serve it to their families.

Sales of Le Creuset pans rose 33% in September (over August) at PCC Natural Markets, Seattle, at the five stores where it sold cookware.

“I think that if people are coming into our stores, they're looking for high-quality food, and they want quality cookware to go with it,” said Stephanie Steiner, grocery merchandiser.

“I don't have \$400 stock pots, but instead a great selection of highly durable, high-value pots and utensils. There are other brands that may be cheaper, but these perform exceptionally well, will last a long time and are easy to clean.”

Everyday utensils and midrange cookware are the big sellers, especially at this time of year, she added. And several brands have been making a splash with brightly colored products.

“People respond to color, and we opened our Edmonds [Wash.] store in September with a display of color-coordinated dinnerware and cookware with matching utensils and linens,” said Steiner.

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This really helped with sales, she said, but it's not just that. "We're doing a better job of merchandising. We make it almost irresistible."

Cathy Kennedy, category manager of general merchandise at Bashas', Chandler, Ariz., is also seeing an increase in cookware sales.

"We always sell a lot at this time of year, and a lot has to do with the weather, but I think with the economy, people are starting to cook more," she said.

In September she started a long-term reduced-price promotion that will run at least through December on basics such as cookie sheets, loaf pans and oblong cake pans – "the basics that people always use," she said.

This year Kennedy has added to her cookware line with home entertaining products such as chip-and-dip platters, serving plates and relish pots, because, she said, people are doing more home entertaining as well as cooking for their families.

She has also introduced a line of cookie jars. "We decided that people might be giving more home-baked goods as gifts this year."


Publix Super Markets, Lakeland, Fla., sees a lot of cookware sales as a result of its Apron's Make-Ahead Meals program, which is held in Publix's Apron's Cooking Schools or Publix GreenWise Markets. The cookware lines carried in these stores tends to be upscale and professional, said spokeswoman Maria Brous.

"Our Apron's Simple Meals kiosks [where meal specialists prepare and sample recipes, provide recipe cards and make the ingredients available] are often set up near areas where our housewares are featured," she added.

For retailers who are looking to move into selling cookware, or who want to boost their sales of it, the first thing they should do is find out exactly what their shoppers are looking for, according to Jim Hertel, managing partner, Willard Bishop, Chicago. "[Retailers] can adopt this and make it work for them."

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There's no point selling a paella pan to someone who lives alone, so you have to understand your shoppers' household size and household income," said Mogelonsky.

The best way to grab customers with cookware is to cross-merchandise it, said Taft. "Ideally you do it not as a promotion or a one-off, but as a way the store is presented to the consumer," he said.

Bashas' cookware is sold from the baking aisle, and there's an 8-foot set containing utensils such as spatulas, wooden spoons and pastry brushes.

Kennedy cross-merchandises, too, especially in the fourth quarter, which is when customers pick up their cooking pace. During these months she features a kitchen gadget spinning merchandiser holding turkey basters and the like in the meat aisle, and a baking table by the main entrance with bakeware and ingredients.

"Occasionally we will run a breakfast-themed ad and put a fixture of the fry pans back by the egg cases," said Kennedy. She also ties in small appliances and bakeware items on the grocery endcaps.

PCC Natural Markets cross-merchandises as much as possible. French onion soup bowls are placed in the deli, and Le Creuset pot roast dishes are located in the meat department.

At Publix in Jacksonville, Fla., cookware is located at the entrance to the cooking school; in Tampa, Fla., the cooking school is located in the mezzanine of the store, so the items are merchandised near the stairs.

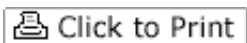
Another Washington retailer, Central Market in Shoreline, has also seen cookware sales jump – by 12% in the past quarter compared with the previous year.

"We're planting the idea," said Erin Kealy, housewares manager, who likes to place ice cream dishes and scoops in the freezer aisle, for example.

But she'll keep a core housewares department behind the store's Culinary Resource Center, a display cooking demonstration area, because she said customers tend to gravitate toward it when they've seen a cookware item being used by a professional chef.

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Selling Cookware: Try It Out

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For a fresh take on selling cookware, there's Central Market in Shoreline, Wash.

Here, housewares manager Erin Kealy expects to launch a tryout program on three different pans: a 12-inch skillet, a 2-quart saucepan and a 3.5-quart saute pan.

Customers wishing to test one of these pans for 48 hours leave a deposit of \$25 to \$40. If they decide to buy it, they return the item and pay for a brand new pan, minus the amount of their deposit. If they choose not to buy, their deposit is returned to them.

"I picked three different pans that I thought everybody would use in their homes," said Kealy. "They're middle-of-the-road as far as cookware's concerned, and I believe cookware's no different than any other commodity – it's about finding what you want in your price range."

The program will be launched on Dec. 1, when the store's remodel will be complete. If it's successful, it may be implemented at the two other Central Market Stores (in nearby Poulsbo and Mill Creek), and more houseware items will be added to the program.

Kealy said she expects the program not only to increase cookware sales, but also to decrease the number of returns she sees in her department.

"This is a great idea, because people don't know what they want to commit to, and we're supposed to be economizing," said Marcia Mogelonsky, senior research analyst with Mintel International, Chicago, Ill.

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