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## More Cheese, Please: Americans Boost Spending on Specialty Foods

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Americans are buying more specialty foods than ever, according to a report released Wednesday by the Specialty Food Association (SFA). The SFA defines specialty foods as products with limited distribution and high quality, such as cheese, condiments, seafood, and nut butters. Americans spent \$88.3 billion on specialty foods in 2013, a record high for the fourth year in a row, up 18.4 percent over 2011.



Foodservice sales, including cheese sold at restaurants, are \$18 billion of the specialty foods sector. THINKSTOCK

Foodservice sales represent \$18 billion of the specialty food market, or 20 percent. Consumers are showing more interest in Mediterranean, Latin (non-Mexican), Korean, and Indian cuisines, based on reports from importers and retailers. Importers reported growth in the foodservice sector, though manufacturers say it is their slowest-growing sales channel.

Leading the 51 segments encompassed by specialty food were cheese and cheese alternatives, with \$4 billion in sales in 2013, according to the SFA, marking a 16.1 percent increase from 2011 to 2013. The fastest-growing segment, however, was nut and seed butters, indicating consumers are continually looking for alternatives to proteins.

Spending in the specialty food sector has grown before, during, and after the recession, demonstrating consumers' commitment to high quality foods despite economic conditions. Positive long-term factors will contribute to the growth of the specialty food industry, says Ron Tanner, vice president of philosophy, government, and industry relations at the SFA.

"The children of baby boomers, people in their 20s and 30s—a group that traditionally spends a large portion on food and beverage—is the generation raised to be more diverse, more worldly, and more well traveled," Tanner says of their spending.

The SFA notes consumers have shown strong interest in all-natural, organic, local, and non-GMO products, though distributors of specialty foods believe interest in all-natural products will decline in the next three years. The term *all-natural* has no regulated definition, making many consumers suspicious about products' claims.

"U.S. consumers are more sophisticated and discerning about their food choices than ever before," Tanner says. "Retailers and restaurants of all kinds are responding by offering more specialty foods crafted by makers of artisanal cheeses, innovative vinegars, and health-oriented snacks."

By Kirsten Ballard

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