

Magic chefs



Chef Dave Zino,
Beef & Culinary Center

Manufacturers are employing corporate chefs to create new uses for grocery items.

BY RICHARD TURCSIK

HERE'S A SPECIAL DINNER TREAT TO TRY AT HOME: Delectable Black Raspberry Duck Breast. Simply combine port wine, thyme, rosemary, sea salt, black pepper, cloves, and the secret ingredient—three Blue Bunny Sweet Freedom Black Raspberry Bars that are melted down—then marinate four duck breasts in it for 24 hours before baking at 350 degrees for 10 minutes.

Duck pairs wonderfully with the flavors of sweet, dark fruits, like black raspberries, says John Kennedy. He's the culinologist at Le Mars, Iowa-based Wells' Dairy, Inc., and it's his job to create new uses for the company's Blue Bunny line of products.

"We're trying to push the boundaries with our ice cream," Kennedy tells *Grocery Headquarters*. "We're trying to show the consumer that this is a product that you don't have to eat cold anymore."

Not only that, but you can eat it for breakfast too. "You can take a scoop of vanilla ice cream and melt it down and make a French toast batter, or throw in some flour, sugar and vanilla and make pancakes," Kennedy says. "Who says you can't use ice cream? If you break down its composition, it's cream, milk, sugar, egg and maybe some vanilla."

The only component in a strawberry is a strawberry, and it's up to Eric DeGroot, executive chef at Watsonville, Calif.-based Well-Pict Berries to find new uses for it. "The strawberry is a very versatile fruit, but a lot of people think one dimensional about it," he says. "So it's up to me to open the eyes of the consumer and tell them that they can use it in savory, sweet and in-between dishes, too."

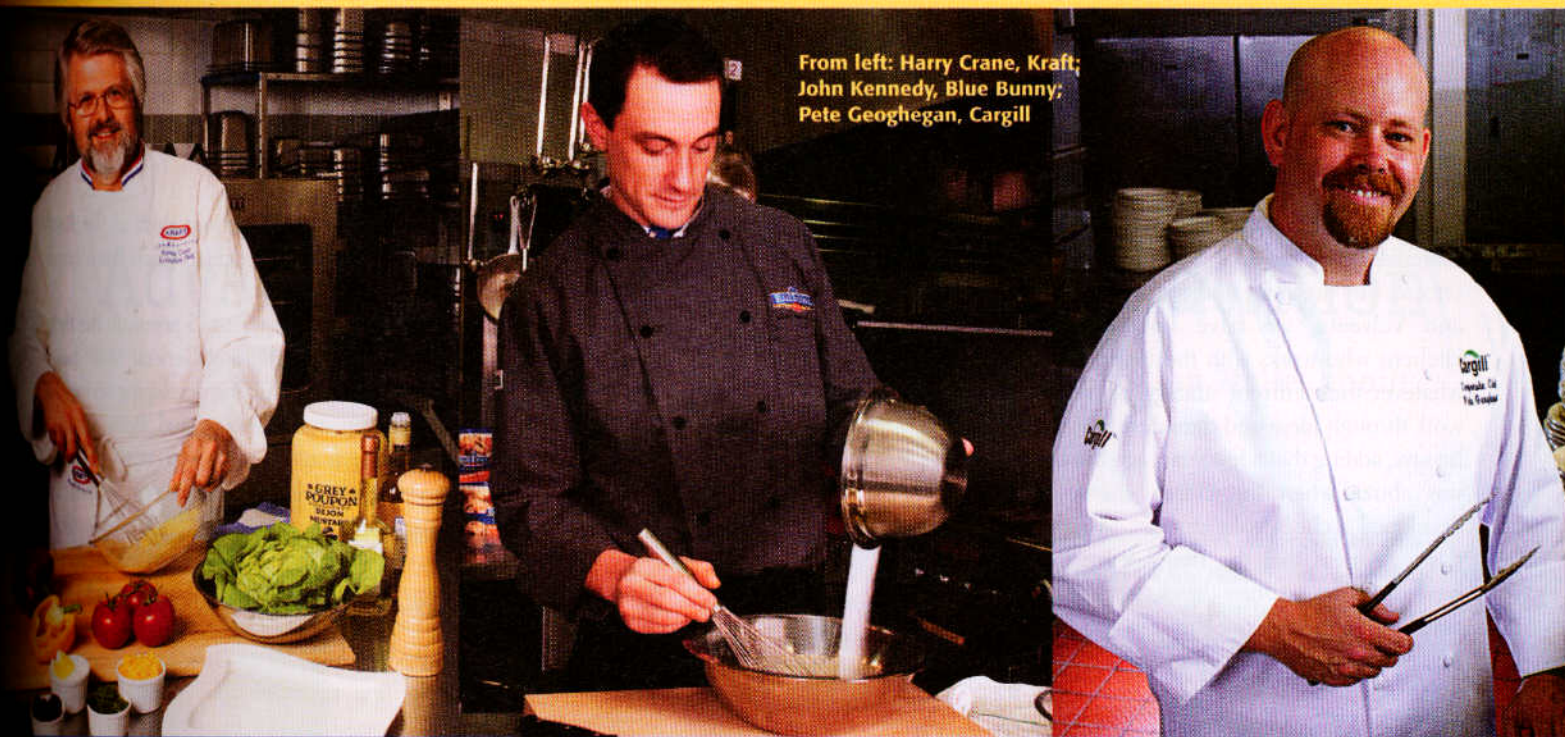
DeGroot admits that can be a challenge. "Over the years I've run into brick walls, saying is there anything else that I can possibly do," he says. "But one set of inspiration opens a lot of other doors."

Strawberry ravioli is one of his signature dishes "that blew people away." Another is a simple balsamic vinegar with strawberries. "That combination has been around for centuries in Italy," he says. "You reduce it down, then put a little black pepper in it and it makes a great presentation because you keep the strawberries whole." Well-Pict promotes the recipes via websites and blogs.

Montvale, N.J.-based Reckitt Benckiser promotes new recipes for its French's and Frank's Red Hot products through public relations, press kits, FSI coupon drops and thematic inserts in women's services magazines. Sometimes the company will do what is called an A-B split, where a recipe and coupon is run in one magazine and not another to see if it results in an increase in sales.

That's how it knew it had a hit with its French's French Fried Onion-coated baked chicken. "We ran a thematic piece in February or March and saw a spike in sales and we could say with confidence it wasn't because of our green bean casserole, which spikes sales around Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter," says Janet Andreas, French's Test Kitchen manager, culinary marketing at Reckitt Benckiser. The French's French Fried Onions are simply crushed and used to coat a piece of chicken. It's a more delicious—and higher margin—substitute for breadcrumbs. "We extended it to other proteins and created recipes for pork tenderloins, pork chops and fish," she says.

Creating new recipes has help boost French's French Fried Onion



From left: Harry Crane, Kraft;
John Kennedy, Blue Bunny;
Pete Geoghegan, Cargill

sales and led to stronger year-round movement. Because it is a smaller company, Reckitt Benckiser has also found success teaming with larger players, like Camden, N.J.-based Campbell Soup, whose cream of mushroom soup is another key ingredient in that green bean casserole. "We've had a very nice working relationship with Campbell's," Andreas says. "This is something companies like to do if they can because it really maximizes their marketing efforts. You have more than one company trying to get the message out there and it helps to share the costs of advertising."

The consumer products goods industry is increasingly looking to corporate chefs to create new uses for their products, increasing sales and market share in the process. "Whole Foods is a big recruiter of our graduates because they want the demonstration, but even ConAgra, Sara Lee and other companies are hiring these culinary grads," says Colin Roche, department chair, College of Culinary Arts, at the North Miami Campus of Johnson & Wales University.

Roche says the chefs often work with food scientists to develop ways to mass produce new products, while maintaining product quality and integrity. "We have a lot more students getting into the research chef field, particularly on the nutrition side," he says. "We have a bachelor's degree in nutrition, and a lot of our students will get two years in culinary arts to be a chef."

"A big push in the industry has been in research and development and more chefs are coming in," says Chef Pete Geoghegan, the

corporate chef at Cargill Meat Solutions in Wichita, Kan. "Food science is taught in a lot of the schools, but the question is do the scientists have the palate to understand the flavors and textures. That's where the chefs come in. It is the really, really important part," he says.

Johnson & Wales graduate Mark Aaron Ross finds being a corporate chef less stressful than working in the restaurant business. "You still have long hours and travel a lot, but there's that sense of normalcy, and it has allowed me to watch my two kids grow up," says Ross, who is now the Southeast & Gulf Coast regional business development manager and corporate chef in the Chapel Hill, N.C. office of Bellingham, Wash.-based surimi manufacturer Trans-Ocean Products, Inc.

Prior to Trans-Ocean, Ross was the executive chef at Duke University, and has also worked with several well-known restaurant chefs, but he doesn't miss the 14-hour days and finds his role at Trans-Ocean the most satisfying. "I am educating the general public on how to use our products," he says. Seafood pizza, seafood tortellini and crab nachos are among the dishes he's created using Crab Classic and its sister products, and this fall he will be rolling out a new repertoire based on Trans-Ocean's new smoked salmon line.

"I create recipes with things that are found in the grocery store and are pre-made, like pastas and sauces and we incorporate our products into those," Ross says. "These are easy 15 to 20 minute recipes that families can enjoy

that are healthier than eating out. I try to create recipes that are a good source of protein, are low in cholesterol, low in fat and promote a healthy lifestyle."

Ross' recipes are promoted through national ad campaigns and an infomercial on *Kitchen Spaces*. "We gave the general public an understanding that surimi seafood is not imitation; it is 100% Alaskan Pollock with king crab or lobster meat that is a good source of protein, is low fat and low cholesterol and fortified with omega-3, which is the miracle drug right now."

When developing recipes it's important to use items consumers readily have in their kitchens, says Harry Crane, executive chef, Culinary Resources & Strategy, at Kraft Foods in Glenview, Ill. "It is intuitively obvious that if you have a recipe with a Kraft ingredient and four or five other ingredients, if they are things that people have on hand, there is a higher probability that people will make the recipe," Crane says.

That's why every two or three years Kraft conducts a Pantry Study, a national study of what people have on hand in their kitchens. "Some of the *Food Network* shows have people running off and buying these oddball ingredients that people will probably never use again in their lives," Crane says. "So we really try to keep that in mind."

Crane and his team work with food scientists to develop concepts and cooking instructions for a diverse range of products including DiGiorno pizza, Kraft macaroni & cheese and

Oscar Mayer Flatbread sandwiches. "For our ingredient brands, like Philadelphia cream cheese, our dressings and mayonnaise, Jell-O and Velveeta, we have someone in the kitchens who works with the brand teams on whatever their current strategy is, help them work through ideas and then develop recipes," he says, adding that a few years ago the kitchen was abuzz when the cream cheese group developed a cheesecake strategy. "We worked down to ideas that the brand team thought were the best and then developed the recipes and helped them work through the advertising, photography, etc.," Crane says.

He is currently working on a strategy for A.I. Steak Sauce and developing recipes for the brand's website. That's because the days of Kraft sponsoring an hour of prime time TV to showcase the latest Velveeta recipes has gone the way of the John Davidson Christmas Special. "I've been reviewing scripts and editing and making sure the culinary content is correct, as are the cuts of meat mentioned in



the recipe," Crane says.

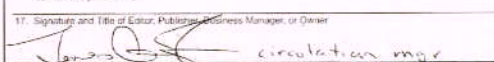
In addition to the Web, Kraft advertises its recipes in flyers, magazine ads, on the pack-

age itself and publications such as the *Kraft Food & Family Magazine*, which has a circulation of 6.6 million.

In Minneapolis, about 25 people in the Betty Crocker Test Kitchens at General Mills' headquarters are also working developing recipes for that company's Pillsbury and Betty Crocker digest-size magazines, as well as several hard-cover cookbooks. "Many of our recipes are developed based on either new or existing products in our company, and some recipes do not even necessarily use our products," says Maggie Gilbert, director, Betty Crocker Test Kitchens.

Today, most Betty Crocker recipes use at least one prepared component, like Green Giant vegetables or Pillsbury Crescent Rolls. "We know consumers are looking for convenience," Gilbert says. "They are looking for recipes that do not take very long—not only to make, but also to get the ingredients, prepare the actual recipe and clean up. We think about the whole process from beginning to end and take people through it."

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