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CULINARY CUSTOMIZATION DRIVES AT-HOME COOKS EATING HABITS

More consumers are choosing salad and potatoes as the main attraction at mealtime

PLYMOUTH, Wis. (July 7, 2008) – As at-home chefs become more experimental with their culinary creations, these ‘food adventurers’ are becoming increasingly interested in discovering new meal options. And, as a result of this phenomenon, both potato and salad customization have become two of the fastest growing food trends in the country.

- Considered America’s favorite vegetable, according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), potatoes have established themselves as a dominant figure in the culinary world.
- 2008 has been declared the “International Year of the Potato” by the General Assembly of the United Nations.
- As local food markets continue to see year-on-year growth, produce as a whole has grown by nearly 20 percent over the last two years, with lettuce and potatoes pulling in 40 percent of that increase.

The potato has long been a staple of home cooking, evolving over time into a flexible meal item that can be customized as an appetizer, side dish or main course. Like salad, its counterpart in the produce arena, the potato is not just a simple side dish; it serves as the featured food. Mashed, baked, scalloped, roasted, boiled or fried, specialty potatoes are on the rise, and people are consuming more than 140 pounds of potatoes annually.

This summer, Sargento is taking potato and salad customization to a new level with the introduction of *Salad Finishers* and *Potato Finishers*. Available in a variety of flavors, *Salad* and *Potato Finishers* include two or three individually wrapped ingredients inside each package. With quality ingredients such as Sargento natural cheese, flame grilled marinated whole chicken breast, smoked real bacon crumbles, and chef-inspired sauces made with natural cheese and other fresh ingredients, personalizing your potatoes and salads with great tasting toppings just became easier.

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“The versatility and customization benefits of salads and potatoes are not only recognized by consumers, but are increasingly highlighted in restaurant menus across the country,” said Chip Schuman, Vice President of Marketing – Consumer Products Division (CPD). “As people continue to embrace the more than 58 varieties of potatoes typically grown in the United States, we will see more elaborate ways to serve the potato at home.”

According to a 2008 article in the *Nation’s Restaurant News*, celebrity chefs drove the growth in salad popularity over the years by selling leafy greens as an acceptable entrée and now consumers are seeing an increase of menu items featuring salads. In fact, more and more restaurants and salad chains are carving out a niche in the fast growing salad customization segment.

“Each year, supermarkets nationwide experience booms in specific food-related categories, and 2008 is primed to be a big year for both the potato and salad,” said Schuman. “We are excited to be on the front end of this growing trend with the release of our new line of *Sargento Salad Finishers* and *Potato Finishers*.”

In addition to being an ideal option for unique recipes, potatoes are also rich in nutrients. According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), a medium-sized is filled with 45 percent of the recommended daily allotment of Vitamin C. Potatoes also rank highest for potassium content and continue to hold steady as one of the top 20 most frequently eaten raw vegetables and fruits. They are rich in fiber and packed with vitamins and minerals.

Additional information may be obtained by contacting Rory Swikle at 312-755-6207 or via email at rswikle@wheatleytimmons.com.

Sargento Foods Inc. has demonstrated its passion for cheese and cheese-based solutions throughout its history. Founded in 1953 in Plymouth, Sargento is a leading manufacturer, packager and marketer of natural shredded, sliced and snack cheeses, cheese appetizers, ingredients and sauces. Sargento is owned and operated by the Gentine family, and has net sales of \$700 million.

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