Sweet and Savory — A Trendspotter’s Perspective

Sweet and savory flavor combinations offer adventure, complexity and satisfaction.

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Over the last few years sweet and savory flavor combinations have been the dominating activity in food and beverage development. While sweet and salty snacking options have been around for some time—think Chex Mix Honey Nut or classic kettle corn popcorn—we really have to thank salted caramel for bringing the popularity of sweet and salty foods up to a whole new level. Salted caramel, the undisputed flavor of the year in 2012, kicked off a full-fledged love affair with all things sweet and savory, and the trend shows no signs of slowing down. The doors have been opened wide for a parade of unexpected flavor combinations to shock the palates and satisfy the senses.

While upscale-restaurant menus have been leveraging the power of salt in desserts for many years, it wasn’t until 2010 that the sweet and salty flavor pairing began showing up on mainstream menus. In the fall of 2010, Starbucks introduced a salted caramel bar and salted caramel hot chocolate, both of which were met with rave consumer reviews. While several other concepts toyed with salted caramel around the same time, it really took another year or two before other food-service establishments followed suit.

From milkshakes to cake, salted caramel continued its seduction. As the sweet and salty flavor combination spread across menus, caramel flavor—whether solo or in various pairings—was taking off. So it comes as no big surprise that in 2011 retail launches of caramel confections grew 14 percent, serving as further evidence to support salted caramel’s well deserved honor of being named flavor of the year in 2012. This was the year the salted caramel trend truly took off, with launches thriving across categories from confections and baked goods to frozen desserts and dairy offerings.

As consumers continue to seek out more adventurous flavor choices, the well-balanced complexity of salted caramel perfectly caters to the evolving adult sweet tooth. In 2010, salted caramel desserts were available on less than one-half percent of U.S. restaurant menus. By 2014, that number had grown to more than three percent, and it continues to climb today. Now, salted caramel offerings in both food and beverage