



## NOSTALGIC NOTIONS:

Capturing the emotions of  
childhood and sentimentality  
in foods and beverages

Especially in these difficult times, almost everyone appreciates a walk down memory lane – a reminder of roasting marshmallows on that camping trip by the lake, eating hot dogs and candied popcorn at a baseball game, or making rice cereal treats with Grandma.

These fond reminders of childhood can add a spring to our steps and a boost to our mood. And brands are tapping into the idea by bringing back or revamping products or flavors from years past, but often with a modern twist to surprise and delight today's experience-seeking consumers.

Though this may be just an emerging trend, it could be poised for mainstream success.

According to Mintel's Trend Driver Global Survey,

**71%** of U.S. consumers say they enjoy products that remind them of childhood.

This is not just about marketing spin. It turns out that food nostalgia is a specific thing – certain foods actually prompt a nostalgic feeling in the brain, and there is a growing body of research to back this up. Researchers now note a link between the brain and our perceptions and memories related to certain foods, according to a report on food and nostalgia from FONA international.<sup>1</sup> It turns out that the hippocampus, the part of the brain associated with memories, learning and emotion, plays a specific role in memory retention, emotional feelings and smell, all of which are related to eating and drinking.

Research now suggests that specific foods can evoke memories that impact how we feel in the present. For example, a 2015 study noted that certain subjects who had secure and strong relationships tended to turn to comfort foods when feeling isolated.<sup>2</sup> Another study suggested that different scents, including those from

foods that are familiar and autobiographically relevant can elicit feelings of nostalgia.<sup>3</sup>

Eating and drinking is, of course, a social experience. It creates special moments in our lives and helps link us to family, or solidify our standing as part of a social group. But that said, everyone has different life experiences, so feelings of nostalgia will be triggered by different foods and beverages for every individual.

## Broad generational appeal

Not surprisingly, the concept of nostalgia is particularly appealing as we get older, according to a Euromonitor International report, "Packaged Food: Moving Beyond Millennials – Snacks for Aging Consumers." But that said, nostalgia in products does resonate across generations.

The report suggests that these products will engage older consumers who might be looking to reminisce about the good old days and share those experiences with grandchildren. For Gen X and Millennials, a nostalgic product can help them reconnect with their inner child, a concept called "kidulting," as well as share those memories with their own children. For Generation Z, a generation that is barely out of childhood, one appeal of nostalgic products is their hip, retro vibe.<sup>5</sup>

There are two distinct types of nostalgia in food and beverages, according to the FONA report. One centers on indulgence and comfort. In other words, developers are creating products that tap into warm, fuzzy feelings that are clearly indulgent in nature, often featuring the taste and texture – as well as the high calories, sodium and sugar – that consumers would expect in its original form. The second type is next-gen nostalgia, in which products may remind consumers of their childhood, but offer a more adult or modern mindset, such as a healthier fruity cereal or alternative nut butter.



Nostalgia has become particularly important in the booming snack category for several reasons. Snacks, for instance, are often among the first branded foods we eat as children and may be linked to core memories.<sup>6</sup> As such, consumers also tend to have strong emotional ties to snacks regarding taste, smell, texture and even packaging. In addition, many consumers are increasingly turning to snacks for an easy meal... and if they also offer a fun sensory experience, that's an added value.

Similarly, categories like confectionery and convenience foods also provide good fodder for nostalgic revamps. Like snacks, these products conjure fond memories and are well-positioned to provide a fun way to connect with the next generation. Following are a few tips when considering a nostalgic product launch:

## The flavor factor

Flavor is particularly important in re-awakening happy childhood memories. The FONA team looked at specific flavors and found that certain nostalgic tastes were especially effective in engaging consumers. Products that feature s'mores (the campfire-classic chocolate/marshmallow/graham cracker combination) as a flavor rated highly as an indulgent treat that signifies fun.

Likewise, peanut butter and jelly- and cherry-flavored products also tended to rate highly and had a positive purchase impact.<sup>7</sup>

## Make it shareable

Almost everyone now uses the internet and social media (even older consumers), and they are looking for products that offer experiences they can share online with friends. Products that bring back silly childhood activities or tie in with memorable events from holidays or historical happenings can offer an added incentive for share-ability. For example, a limited-edition Oreo cookie celebrating the 50th anniversary of the 1969 moon landing appealed to both those who remembered the actual event, as well as younger consumers who wanted to know more about it.<sup>8</sup>

## Understand the era

Whether you are looking to offer a new take on TV dinners or a healthier toaster pastry, it is important to know as much as possible about not only the era of the original product, but also the target customer. As noted earlier, what resonates as a happy childhood experience for one person may be just a bunch of silliness to another. Furthermore, some consumers may want the product to be as close as possible to the original, while others may prefer a better-for-you option. A strong understanding of your target customer will help ensure success.

Getting nostalgia right can create social connections with customers that will build brand loyalty and solidify customer relationships for years to come.

<sup>1</sup> FONA International. "Nostalgia: Old Inspirations for New Innovations." March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Troisi, J.; et al. "Threatened Belonging and Preference for Comfort Food Among the Securely Attached." *Appetite*. 2015. July;90:58-64. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0195666315000768?via%3Dihub>

<sup>3</sup> Reid, C; et al. "Scent-Evoked Nostalgia." *Memory*. 2015. 2(23): 157-166. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09658211.2013.876048>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. FONA International.

<sup>5</sup> Euromonitor International. "Packaged Food: Moving Beyond Millennials – Snacks for Aging Consumers." February 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. FONA International.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Euromonitor International.