



Apples Join the Fresh-Cut Fruit Parade

Getting kids to eat more fruits and vegetables is a goal most parents – and physicians, teachers and other concerned adults – share. But it's not easy, especially away from home. Fresh produce items, in particular, can be difficult to prep ahead and merchandise as convenient food choices. New product development, however, is changing that scenario.

Take apples. As nature's own hand-held convenience food, they should be a win-win. But in their natural state, apples aren't particularly good for foodservice. They have to be peeled, cored, sliced, diced and used before they turn brown. And, someone has to throw away the remains.

All this has changed with the perfection of a process that cuts ripe apples into 12 slices, bathes them in a natural, flavorless solution of Vitamin C and calcium to keep them from turning brown and packages them either in snack size or larger packs. The process is able to do two things: (1) produce the ultimate in convenience and (2) make a product usable that has been relatively unusable in foodservice because of spoilage and the labor involved.

"Twelve slices a day keep the doctor away" doesn't have the same ring as the original maxim "an apple a day keeps the doctor away," but you could say slices are the new apple. This revolutionary process has made possible a hassle-free way to serve the fruit fresh in foodservice operations, as McDonald's now does. And apple slices have potential far beyond hand-held kid snacks in school foodservice or healthful substitutes for fries with sandwiches. They can add pizzazz to a wide variety of menu items that have appeal for adults, as well as kids:

- Waldorf salad made fast and easy with apple slices
- Pork chops with sautéed cinnamon apple slices
- Cheese plate with apple slices and toasted walnuts
- Grilled cheese, bacon and apple slice sandwich
- Curried shrimp garnished with apple slices and pine nuts

Pre-cut category growing

Apple slices as convenience items follow in the wake of fresh-cut greens and bagged baby carrots. In fact, the fresh-cut fruit category is growing rapidly. Yahoo recently announced a joint venture between Sunkist Growers and Taylor Farms to create a fresh-cut fruit and vegetable company. The products created by the two giants will be available for retail and foodservice.

According to an article in *The New York Times Magazine* (February 12, 2006), pre-sliced plums, celery, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, mangoes and star fruits are all waiting in the production wings, next in line to be delivered in ready-to-use in handy packages.

The new fresh-cut products will make healthy food convenient and easy-to-use by foodservice operators. They can add real value to a restaurant's offerings.

Survey Says Produce Is “In”

The overall fresh-cut produce phenomenon is in response to consumer demand for more fresh produce. According to *Fresh Trend* research conducted for *The Packer*, a produce industry trade magazine, 94% of diners eat fresh produce with meals away from home. More than one in four people say they *always* eat produce when they dine out. The trend survey also said that six in 10 people actually consider the availability of menu items with produce when they choose where they are going to dine.

According to *The Packer*, the up-and-coming fresh produce items are spring mix, pomegranates, heirloom tomatoes, apples and blood oranges. While salads are the No. 1 produce item ordered, one in three people surveyed have tried fresh-cut fruit from a quick-serve restaurant. So far, fresh-cut fruit has had mixed reviews in quick-serve restaurants. McDonald's Apple Dippers have remained on the menu, but Wendy's discontinued its yogurt with cantaloupe, honeydew, pineapple, and red grape offering after lagging sales. However, as there is continued focus on reducing obesity, there will be increased use of fresh fruit in all foodservice segments. The key is finding the right fit -- the right products for your operation and your particular customer base.