

U.S. FOODLINK

The bi-monthly newsletter for importers of U.S. foods

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The Top Emerging Food and Beverage Trends TO WATCH IN 2026

From grocery aisles to restaurant menus, 2026 is expected to be a year of practical food and beverage innovations that will likely be driven by increased consumer demand for value, wellness, and flavor.

American consumers are increasingly asking for both shorter and cleaner ingredient labels, smarter and more personalized nutrition, and functional products that actually “do something” tangible – whether that’s superior hydration, optimal focus, or steady energy.

Let’s explore several of the emerging F&B trends that are expected to gain further momentum next year and beyond.

1 Clean, Dye-Free Labels

Both U.S. consumers and the federal government have been pressuring food manufacturers to swap artificial colors, additives, and ultra-processed foods (UPFs) for simpler and cleaner labels, which has opened even more shelf space for brands that specialize in products such as naturally colored/flavored candies and grain-free snacks packaged with “nothing artificial” callouts.

In a similar vein, the Non-GMO Project is currently piloting the industry’s first Non-UPF Verification program with 15 brands, including Simple Mills and Amy’s Kitchen. Indie players like YumEarth and UNREAL are also continuing to expand their better-for-you sweets lines featuring natural colors and no artificial dyes, while the grain-free snack maker Siete has built a strong following through short, recognizable ingredient lists.

Even CPG giants like Walmart and Mondelez International are hopping on the dye-free bandwagon – a trend that’s expected to continue its growth trajectory for the foreseeable future.

(Continued on page 2)



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The Top Emerging Food and Beverage Trends *Continued*

2 Calmness and Focus in a Can

Beyond energy, U.S. shoppers also want beverages that can help them unwind, sleep, focus, or concentrate, such as magnesium, L-theanine, adaptogens, and nootropics. Recess, for example, sells sparkling “mood” drinks and powders featuring functional ingredients like magnesium L-threonate and adaptogens that reportedly offer relaxing properties – without sugar spikes.

In a similar spirit, Kin Euphorics positions its adaptogen- and nootropic-infused drinks as social-hour alternatives with functional benefits, while Som Sleep develops bedtime-oriented products like low-sugar stick packs that are infused with magnesium, L-theanine, GABA, and melatonin. Even beverage behemoths like Gatorade are dabbling with L-theanine and magnesium.

3 Premium Non-Alcoholic Options

Non-alcoholic (NA) beverages have continued to mature alongside dwindling U.S. alcohol consumption, giving Americans more (and healthier) choices without sacrificing taste. The sober curious lifestyle has clearly stuck around beyond Dry January – and beverage makers have obviously taken notice, as the craft-quality NA choices continue to multiply by the day.

Athletic Brewing has become a leader in the category, with a deep core range of NA beer offerings, as well as frequent limited releases, while Partake Brewing focuses on low-calorie, full-flavor NA beers. In terms of NA wines and spirits, Grüvi produces celebratory sparkling wine alternatives in addition to NA beers, while Ghia offers a bitter, aperitif-style NA bottle.

4 GLP-1 Friendly Pantry Items

More consumers are searching for products that support steady energy and satiety – regardless of whether they’re taking GLP-1 medications or simply following a “GLP-1-ish” diet – which has increased the demand for high-protein, fiber-rich, and lower-sugar snacks and cereals. Catalina Crunch, for instance, specializes in cereals and snack mixes that are high in fiber and protein but contain zero added sugar, making them a logical fit for both individuals living with diabetes and/or those taking GLP-1 drugs.

A competitor, the Three Wishes brand, uses chickpeas to produce grain-free cereals that offer around eight grams

of protein but are low in sugar, while Magic Spoon caters to consumers’ increased appetite for nostalgia via products such as protein treats in classic, beloved flavors like marshmallow and birthday cake.

5 Fermentation-Forward Everyday Foods

From kraut and kimchi to kombucha and “good mood” sodas, live-culture formats are also solidifying their position as daily staples in American diets. Case in point, Wildbrine develops products via raw, unpasteurized fermentation processes and naturally occurring probiotics – no vinegar required. Cleveland Kitchen has also scaled production of its fresh, lightly fermented krauts, pickles, and kimchi, making gut-friendly foods more accessible nationwide.

And on the beverage aisle, Rowdy Mermaid reframes kombucha and sparkling botanicals as functional, lower-sugar refreshers.

6 Affordable Luxuries on the Dairy Aisle (and Beyond)

With restaurant prices continuing to skyrocket, shoppers are opting to upgrade their home-cooking operations with small indulgences that can deliver chef-driven flavor experiences. Epicurean Butter, for example, specializes in chef-crafted flavored butters ranging from Roasted Garlic Herb to Black Truffle that are designed for simple, high-impact finishing. Banner Butter also makes small-batch, slow-cultured rounds as well, which are available in premium flavors like basil and parsley, along with innovative combinations like ginger, cinnamon, and cardamom.

Even grocers are capitalizing on the trend via private labels, debuting truffle-infused or maple compound butters that are designed to elevate the dining-in experience. Next year, it’s likely that the sector will see even more seasonal drops, grill-friendly SKUs, and foodservice crossovers.

7 Less-Processed Protein Alternatives

The next wave of meat alternatives is expected to continue its shift away from long ingredient lists and instead move toward whole-food fermentation and heritage proteins. Meati’s mycelium “whole-cut” steaks and cutlets, for instance, deliver a meaty texture with shorter labels and complete protein profiles.

Meanwhile, Prime Roots reimagines deli meats with koji mycelium designed for consumers who are after classic flavors that are also free of conventional processing baggage, while Upton’s Naturals keeps it simple with seitan and minimally seasoned, ready-to-cook formats. As the plant-based category continues to reset and recover from ultra-processed perceptions, clean formulations and culinary familiarity are likely to be winning strategies for appealing to flexitarians.

Together, these seven trends reflect a growing number of American consumers who are selective but not fussy, seeking out clean labels, clear benefits, and upgrades that make sense for strained budgets. In 2026 and beyond, F&B operators, manufacturers, and importers that utilize straightforward strategies like clearly stating products’ benefits, keeping labels short and honest, and delivering bold, flavorful experiences that attract repeat buyers will likely come out on top.



Three Strategies Consumers Are Leveraging to Offset Higher Food Prices

This year, U.S. F&B prices have continued to rise, driven by a range of factors, including tariffs, inflation, a weakening job market, and extreme weather events that have threatened the supply of staple commodities, such as cocoa and coffee.

As economic uncertainty increases, U.S. consumer confidence dwindles. The Conference Board's consumer confidence index dropped to 94.2 in September, representing a decline of 3.6 points month over month – the lowest reading since April, when President Donald Trump rolled out his extensive tariff policy. Due to these constraints, U.S. consumers have been tightening their wallets and leveraging strategies to stay afloat. Let's explore a few of them.

Private Labels

Recent research by Ipsos revealed that "rising food prices" have become the top concern among today's consumers, impacting 36% of survey respondents. To reduce grocery costs, many consumers are switching to private labels, which has helped the category move beyond negative stereotypes and reposition itself as a premium option that can not only compete with national brands in terms of quality and taste but also significantly surpass them in value. Consumer perceptions reflect this shift. In a recent NIQ survey, nearly half of respondents (44%) said they believed store brands offer a reasonable return on investment, and 40% felt that store brand products were a good alternative to name brands.

The Private Label Manufacturers Association (PLMA) projects that the total dollar sales of private-label products in the U.S. will approach a new all-time high of \$277 billion by the end of this year, and this growth trajectory is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. Private-label dollar sales increased by 4.4% in the first half of the year when compared with the same period in 2024, which outpaced the +1.1% sales growth of national U.S. brands by a notable 3.3%.

Less Dining Out

Forgoing restaurants in favor of cooking meals at home is another strategy consumers are leveraging to save money. While many have continued to prioritize convenience, they're meeting these needs with frozen, ready-to-eat meals or by dining at convenience stores over quick-service restaurants while out and about. Even the consumers who continue frequenting restaurants are changing their purchasing behaviors. This has laid the groundwork for a "trade-down" effect, where customers are either actively seeking out value-oriented promotions or skipping add-ons like beverages and desserts to decrease their check size, according to Placer.ai.

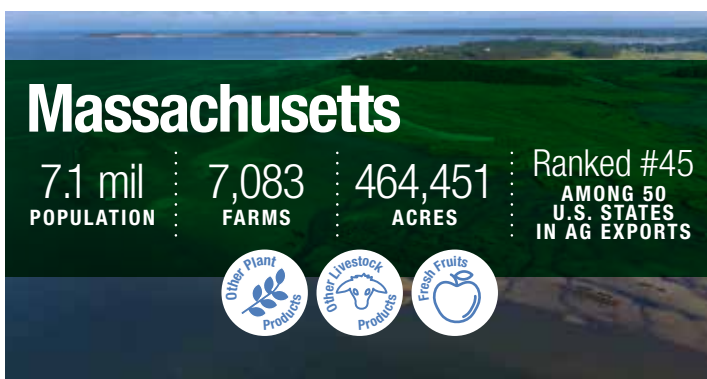
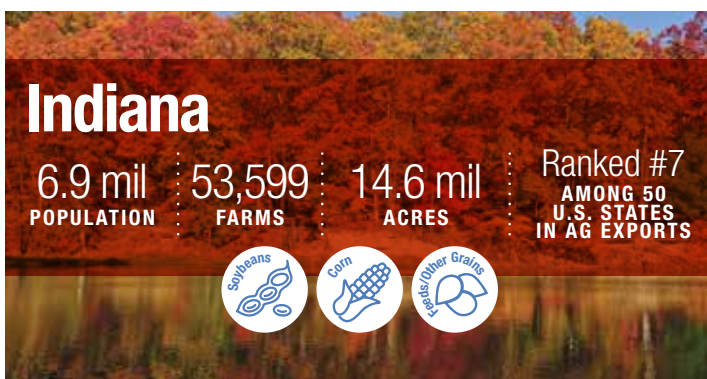
However, the U.S. consumers who are choosing to dine at home are still searching for ways to infuse their day with small moments of joy, which has increased the appeal of "affordable indulgences" like premium, compound butters that help make weeknight dinners feel more special and mixers that offer the craft cocktail experience at home for a fraction of the cost.

Smarter Online Grocery Shopping

While convenience-minded shoppers are continuing to order groceries online, higher relative prices and delivery fees are a major barrier for many, with 49% of shoppers reporting feeling discouraged by encountering unexpected costs when checking out and 54% noting that such service fees can greatly discourage purchases. Third-party food delivery platforms like Uber Eats have been launching app updates to offer consumers more value on grocery delivery purchases to address these concerns, including opportunities to save up to 50% on select fresh products.

Additionally, the platform added more than 2,500 Aldi locations to its roster and also began accepting SNAP-EBT payments made on purchases through the retailer as another value-driven strategy. Nevertheless, U.S. online grocery sales still reached \$9.8 billion in June, up 27.6% year over year due to gains across delivery, pickup, and ship-to-home purchases, according to a report from Brick Meets Click/Mercatus.

Featured U.S. Midwest & Northeast State Profiles



news briefs

Gen Z's brand loyalty hinges on authentic user-generated content, not legacy clout. Food giants like Oreo and McDonald's are losing steam – while Disney thrives by treating fans like community, not consumers.

This latest Gen Z food trends are smoky, global, and TikTok-approved, according to foodservice management firm Chartwells Higher Education. From ube brunch items to “Monster Matcha,” flavor innovations are meeting students where they scroll.

A new survey by Morning Consult revealed that 60% of Americans are buying less beef than usual due to record-breaking prices. The poll also found that many of these consumers are open to purchasing plant-based meat instead, reported *Green Queen*.



As consumers continue to prioritize their health and wellness goals, GLP-1 drug usage will continue to grow. With up to 20% of U.S. adults taking or considering taking the medication, the F&B industry must adapt to these consumer need states.

Approximately 51% of women globally are looking into adding more protein to their diets, driving innovation beyond gym culture. “We will continue to see growth in the protein product industry as opportunities emerge for product innovation that meets consumer health concerns and evolving demand,” noted Euromonitor International.

Many Millennials and Gen Zers are ditching traditional pill bottles in favor of functional foods that blend wellness with daily routines. Brands that deliver science-backed, snackable nutrition are winning over these younger consumers.

A new survey reveals that just 55% of Americans are confident in the safety of the food supply – a record low. The International Food Information Council also found that just 72% of consumers trust the ingredients in the foods they buy, highlighting concerns over recalls and the need for clearer safety communication.

The U.S. economy, job market, inflation, and rising food prices are top-of-mind concerns for American shoppers. As a result, consumers are changing their spending habits, with 45% reducing their general household spending, according to FMI – The Food Industry Association.

Ultra-processed food addiction affects one out of every eight older Americans, according to a new study published in *Addiction*. The rates were highest among women ages 50-65 who reported poorer overall health and greater social isolation.



Anheuser-Busch's Michelob Ultra has overtaken Modelo Especial as the best-selling U.S. beer.

The brand's sales have grown 15% since 2020 due to “disciplined, consistent investment” and its focus on sporting events, reported *Food Manufacturing*.

Although cash-strapped U.S. shoppers are searching for bargains in other aisles, premium butter sales are rising. Grocery prices have increased by roughly 25% in the last five years due to high inflation and economic turbulence, but many shoppers are continuing to splurge on little luxuries, including high-end butter for some, reported *Bloomberg*.

Halloween spending was rather strategic in 2025, with consumers craving novelty, better-for-you treats, and – above all else – value. Budget-conscious buying is reshaping the candy aisle.

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FOOD EXPORT-MIDWEST & FOOD EXPORT-NORTHEAST STAFF

Brendan Wilson
Chief Executive Officer/Executive Director

Michelle Rogowski
Chief Operating Officer/Deputy Director

Laura England
Chief Communications Officer/
Deputy Director

Teresa Miller
Chief Program & Partnership Officer

Gina Donio
Marketing & Communications Manager

Food Export Association of the Midwest (Food Export-Midwest)
29 North Wacker Drive, Suite 1000
Chicago, IL 60606
312.334.9200

Food Export USA-Northeast (Food Export-Northeast)
One Penn Center, 1617 JFK Blvd., Suite 420
Philadelphia, PA 19103 USA
215.829.9111

www.foodexport.org
Comments, Questions,
email: info@foodexport.org

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A+ Berry, Inc.

Lincoln, Nebraska

A+ Berry is a Midwest, university-born food company turning U.S.-grown aronia berries into clean-label, antioxidant-rich products for daily wellness. We partner with local farms and use a gentle, university-developed process that helps preserve polyphenols while smoothing aronia's natural tartness, delivering vibrant flavor and strong shelf appeal. Our export-ready line includes: AroJuice: 8 oz cold-pressed aronia juice, enjoyed straight or as a mixer; AroBoost: 2 oz aronia concentrate shot for anti-inflammation or recovery; AroPowder: freeze-dried aronia fruit powder for beverages, bakery, and functional foods.

All products are free from added sugar, artificial colors, heating process or preservatives. A+ Berry sells in U.S. retail doors and to ingredient buyers, with strong repeat purchases. We welcome importers, distributors, and co-manufacturing partners seeking premium berry ingredients or ready-to-drink formats.



Antoni Ravioli & Pasta Co. Inc.

Massapequa, New York

For 75 years, Antoni Ravioli & Pasta Co. Inc. has produced the highest quality ravioli, pasta, and noodles. The company produces for Private Label, food service, and retail sectors.

While all companies say they have the best products, Antoni Ravioli & Pasta rests on their 75-year reputation to speak for itself. For product information, contact Gene Saucci U.S. phone 1-516-799-0355 or 1-516-263-5544 or email at saucci@optionline.net.



Hoard's Dairyman Farm Creamery

Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin

Our Mexican-Style Manchego combines European heritage with Latin American technique. Its thick, soft texture melts on the palate and is perfect for slicing onto sandwiches or grating over soups and salads. It is a delightful collection of buttery, nutty, tart, and sweet flavor notes.

Great cheese comes from great milk, and great milk comes from Guernsey cows that are fed well, receive outstanding care, and live in a stress-free environment. Guernsey milk is naturally higher in butter fat, this property is maintained in the cheese, but more importantly, the high butterfat content of the milk creates a rich and creamy flavor and gives the cheeses a luxurious, silky texture.

Mexican-Style Manchego pairs well with a dry Riesling, full-bodied Italian red wines, golden ales, fruits, nuts and honey.



Young G's Barbeque Sauce, LLC

Johnston, Iowa

It's no secret that consumers are looking for a NEW story, a NEW taste within an experience that pleases them, gives life, ANEW! As a consumer yourself, you know how important it is to choose healthier foods and condiments.

Savor convenience! New portable portion cups bring big flavor to your sandwich moments. Perfect when bottles are too much. Experience life anew with every bite-sized delight!

PORTION CUP OPTIONS READY TO GO! 168 CUPS per case of Young G's great BBQ sauce varieties Salad dressing also designed for portable, yet high Health Quotient SKU's ready with all favorite tastes kept in!

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C. Howard Company, Inc. (Choward's Brand Candy)

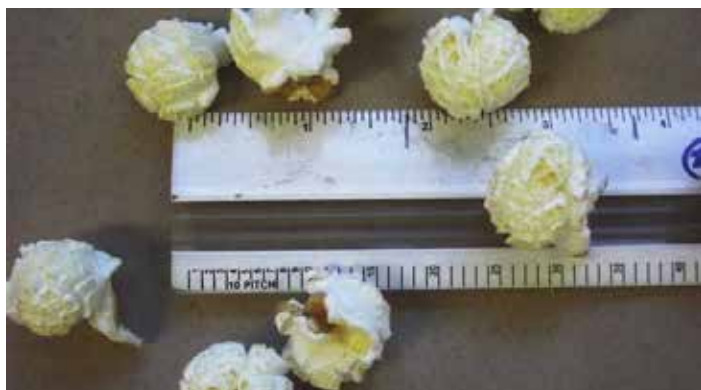
Bellport, New York

C. Howard Company, Inc. was founded in New York City in the early 1930s by Charles Howard. During the Great Depression, Mr. Howard set out to create a "unique and different flavored candy," leading to the launch of Choward's Violet, a distinctively scented mint made in a small Broadway loft. Selling on Manhattan's street corners, the candy quickly gained popularity and became a staple in newsstands and bodegas across New York City, soon expanding throughout the East Coast.

Following its success, Mr. Howard introduced Choward's Scented Gum, a purple-colored gum tablet, and later expanded the line to include Peppermints, Spearmints, Lemon Mints, and most recently, Guava candies.

After Mr. Howard's passing, long-time employee Elizabeth Juhase continued his legacy, later joined by her nephews in the 1970s. Under their leadership, the brand achieved nationwide distribution, with products sold in more than 7,500 stores, including in Hawaii.

Today, C. Howard Company proudly continues to produce the original line of quality candies that began nearly a century ago. Choward's products are now available across all 50 U.S. states, as well as in Canada, Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, Chile, and Bermuda.



Shumway Farms Theater Style Popcorn LLC

Tekonsha, Michigan

Shumway Farms is a 7th-generation family farm that's called Tekonsha, MI home since 1853. We've been growing popcorn for over 30 years and today, customers recognize our popcorn as the best in the business! We sell to customers looking to buy both mushroom and butterfly popcorn kernels in bulk across Michigan, the U.S. and around the world. We have both; bulk quantities and convenient shipping options available.

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East Shore Specialty Foods

Hartland, Wisconsin

East Shore Specialty Foods is a women owned and family run small batch artisan food maker in Hartland, Wisconsin specializing in Slow Cooked Mustards and Specialty Pretzels since 1986. The combinations are simple yet sophisticated dipping snacks perfect for any occasion From Holiday to Gourmet at Play and Everyday! Short ingredient lists boast real ingredients with no preservatives, no artificial colors and no artificial flavors. Visit www.eastshorefoods.com for more company and product information.



Jala-Lujah

Skokie, Illinois

Jala-Lujah Jalapeno Chili Crisp

- **Bold & Crunchy Flavor:** Jala-Lujah chili crisp combines zesty jalapeños infused with extra virgin olive oil, creating a rich, layered taste and satisfying texture that elevates everything from simple snacks to your favorite meals.
- **Lighter take on a Classic Chili Crisp:** Our chilli crisp does not contain red pepper, yet it is spicy and brings balanced heat using Jalapenos with a satisfying crunch, enhancing dishes with bold flavor, making every meal uniquely flavorful.
- **Versatile Culinary Companion:** Adds a sophisticated crunch and zesty kick to pasta, rice, noodles, avocado toast, soups, salads, mediterranean dishes and seafood, transforming simple meals into unforgettable culinary experiences.
- **Clean-Label Goodness:** Crafted with all-natural, vegan, and preservative-free ingredients, this chilli crisp oil delivers heat and depth without compromise, letting your ingredients shine.

Company website: <https://jala-lujah.com/>

Product information: <https://jala-lujah.com/products/jalapeno-chili-crisp>



El Capitan Foods, LLC

Indianapolis, Indiana

El Capitan Foods creates premium snack chips that stand apart through clean, health-forward innovation. Our Decadent Crunch line is crafted with proprietary blends of corn and rice flours, delivering gluten-free, seed oil-free snacks that combine simple, wholesome ingredients with bold, memorable flavors. We're dedicated to redefining indulgence—proving that better-for-you snacks can be truly delicious without compromise.

Decadent Crunch Sweet Cinnamon Rice Tortilla Chips from El Capitan Foods is born from our proprietary rice flour blend, cooked in seedless - and sustainable - palm oil to perfection, then sprinkled with coconut sugar and cinnamon. With a light, elegant crispness and a subtle balance of cinnamon sweetness, these chips offer an indulgent yet refined snack experience that turns humble ingredients into a crave-worthy treat. www.elcapitanfoods.com

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Maple Valley Cooperative

Cashton, Wisconsin

Maple Valley Cooperative is a trusted leader in organic maple syrup production. We specialize in the sustainable harvesting and crafting of consistently delicious organic maple syrup and maple sugar for grocery, ingredient, and foodservice applications.

Small batch production ensures quality, and our dedication to ethical practices means we are committed to excellent customer service, successful partnerships, and transparency.

Maple is naturally regenerative, and sustainability and environmental stewardship are built into every step of the supply chain from our farmer members to you. And, maple category trends show a growing preference for natural and organic sweeteners is driving demand for maple syrup and sugar.

We have several grocery and bulk sizes to choose from and in particular, our shelf-stable easy to dispense 3-gallon Bag-in-Box is a popular choice. Contact: sales@maplevalley.coop for more information.



NOOISH, INC.

Chicago, Illinois

NOOISH's instant matzo ball soup is a hug in a cup. A first of its kind, a warm, savory bowl of matzo ball soup can now be enjoyed in under three minutes — just add water to a broth packet, dehydrated veggies, and three fluffy freeze-dried matzo balls, microwave, and voila! Our elevated matzo balls are vegetarian and made with high quality clean ingredients. For those unfamiliar, matzo balls are a Jewish dumpling made from flour, water, herbs, oil, and eggs that will bring back cherished memories and help create new ones. You definitely do not have to be Jewish to enjoy matzo ball soup. *Product photo credit: Bobby Garfield.*



Show-Me® Bar-B-Q Sauce

Rocheport, Missouri

For five decades, Show-Me® Bar-B-Q Sauce has shown that a few simple ingredients can deliver everything but a simple taste—growing its reputation through word-of-mouth. Rooted in the heart of Missouri, our three sauces and five seasonings are Midwest staples with a reach across kitchens in 50 states, 11 countries, and numerous military bases—thanks largely to our loyal fans sharing their love for our flavors. Our no-refrigeration-needed formula and guaranteed shelf-stability ensure that everyone from backyard grillers and BBQ pitmasters to cooking enthusiasts everywhere can savor our classic taste. At Show-Me®, culinary exploration meets tradition in every bottle, blending authentic bold tastes with the joy of cooking. As a family-owned business, we understand what's truly important transcends beyond any language or cultural barrier — spending time with loved ones eating well. We craft it, but food lovers create the unforgettable moments.

No Refrigeration | Gluten-Free | No Added Preservatives | No Added Fillers

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Snappy Popcorn Co. Inc.

Breda, Iowa

Snappy Popcorn Co. has been a trusted name in popcorn for over 85 years. As a third-generation, family-owned business, we've built our legacy on delivering premium popcorn with integrity, care, and a deep respect for tradition. Our vertically integrated operation means we oversee every step of the process—from planting and harvesting on our own farms to processing, packaging, and distribution. This farm-to-table model ensures unmatched freshness, consistency, and traceability in every batch. At Snappy, we grow only non-GMO popcorn kernels, carefully selected for their superior popping quality and flavor. Our commitment to rigorous quality control is evident at every stage of production. From soil health and seed selection to moisture testing and final packaging, we implement strict standards to ensure every kernel meets our high expectations. With a passion for popcorn and a dedication to excellence, Snappy Popcorn Co. continues to bring wholesome, delicious snacks to families across the world—just as we have for generations. www.snappypopcorn.com



Woeber Mustard Co.

Springfield, Ohio

In 1905 Carl Woeber came from Germany to Springfield Ohio with a handful of mustard recipes, expertise in the art of making mustard and the desire to succeed. He launched his business from the kitchen of his home and sold his mustard door-to-door. Today Woeber has expanded the plant, production and distribution to make Woeber's one of the largest suppliers of mustards and horseradish in the United States. Woeber's manufacturers over 100 types of mustard, horseradish, vinegars and recently organic mustards. They pack in plastic and will private label for exporting. www.woebermustard.com



Driftless Provisions LLC

Viroqua, Wisconsin

Driftless Provisions is a family and veteran owned salami company rooted in the Driftless region of Southwest Wisconsin. We specialize in handcrafted dried, smoked, and fresh meat products made with simple, natural ingredients—designed to honor the land, the animals, and the farmers who make it all possible.

Our products are made exclusively with humanely raised pork and grass-fed beef, raised without antibiotics and are produced completely free of synthetic nitrates. Sustainability is central to everything we do, from ingredient sourcing to our solar-powered salami drying chamber. At Driftless Provisions, we're committed to crafting premium, high-quality meat products that reflect care, transparency, and a deep respect for our food system.



East-West International Group, Inc.

Moreland Hills, Ohio

Founded in 1996, Grandpapa's Snack Company (GPS) is a leading U.S. supplier of canister and bagged snacks. Operating from a 140,000-square-foot facility that adheres to GMP and HACCP guidelines, GPS serves customers worldwide.

The company produces a wide variety of extruded snacks in different shapes, sizes, and flavors, all crafted with a commitment to taste and quality. Unlike traditional fried snacks, Grandpapa's products are baked—a healthier approach that delivers a unique flavor profile. By using real cheese and holding every product to the highest quality standards, GPS sets itself apart from the competition. www.grandpapainc.com

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