Hand-Crafted

A new 75,000-square-foot manufacturing plant is allowing consumers to get their Just Desserts. By Russ Gager

Just Desserts CEO Michael Mendes believes that people crave flavor, not just calories, and his products have been crafted to deliver that in spades. “We’re believers that having a very satisfying dessert is going to allow people to be satiated with less total calories and quantity vs. a lower-quality product that isn’t as satiating and satisfying,” Mendes asserts. “The alternative in a lot of cases is that people aren’t satisfied and their total calorie consumption can be higher.”

Just Desserts’ full-size cakes, single-serve cakes, mini-bundts, cupcakes and bites are handcrafted from all-natural, organic or vegan products in its new 75,000-square-foot production facility in Fairfield, Calif. “We focus on an artisan product we make from scratch with very simple and premium ingredients that your grandmother would use,” Mendes emphasizes. “We use whole eggs, not dried egg whites; we use real butter in lieu of vegetable oil; we use high-quality Madagascar vanilla. We are sourcing a variety of flours that we are blending from scratch vs. a lot of our com-
petitors, who will start with a premade mix they buy from someone else. We blend our own unique mixes. We hand-decorate our cakes, and it’s an artisan process.”

To produce in the quantities it does—Just Desserts’ products are distributed nationwide and to Mexico, Canada and Southeast Asia—the company has to rely on a large-scale tunnel oven and automated depositors in its processes. “We try to use automation where it helps to create consistency and cost-efficiency, but we don’t want to compromise quality when there’s an art form to the process,” Mendes stresses. “We think we need to have human interface, but we're trying to use people where they really bring value and amplifying it. We find in decorating and mixing in particular, talented people bring a lot to the process.”

That human interface has been present in the company’s products since Just Desserts was founded in a San Francisco cafe in 1974. “What we have come to realize is that when baking, there are many factors that can impact the finished quality of the product,” Mendes maintains. “The temperature and humidity can’t be perfectly controlled, so you really benefit from experienced bakers interfacing with technology to make the appropriate adjustments. That’s critical to our whole baking, mixing and decorating process to have the finished products be high-quality and consistent.”

**Freezing Preserves Quality**

Just Desserts’ products are kept fresh by being stored below zero degrees Fahrenheit and distributed frozen. “We’ve learned a lot about how to produce a premium-quality product using natural ingredients, with no preservatives, trans-fats or artificial colors,” Mendes maintains. “We bake the desserts and immediately freeze them to assure optimal freshness. We expedite that freezing process because the faster the product freezes, the smaller the size of ice crystals, and that helps preserve the quality of the product.”

The new plant has a 12,000-square-foot freezer that is three times larger than the one in the company’s former facility in Oakland, Calif. “Retailers are able to store our products in the freezer, and when they sell them, they bring them out as needed with optimal shelf life,” Mendes notes. “It’s great for the bakery manager; it helps to dramatically reduce their stales. They have a very high utilization rate vs. the fresh in-store bakery, where you bake it and if you don’t get the demand, there’s a much larger stale or unusable amount of product that must be disposed of. It also helps complement the in-store bakery with product to keep the bakery shelves replenished when the in-store bakery can’t meet demand.”
Organic and Vegan
Just Desserts has all-natural, organic and vegan lines of its products, which are sold only under the Just Desserts brand. “Our new facility has been designed specifically to accommodate our rapidly growing organic and vegan business,” Mendes points out. He refuses to compromise on the flavor of these products.

“We blend our own unique mixes. We hand-decorate our cakes, and it’s an artisan process.” – Michael Mendes

So consumers may be able to receive their Just Desserts at any time of day. The company also is exploring improvements in the functionality and visual appeal of its packaging to reflect the quality of the products inside.

The company’s strategy is always to complement existing grocery store offerings and enhance consumer choice. “We’re not looking to replace the corner bakery,” Mendes stresses. “We think there’s quite a gap between the super-premium bakery and the large-scale supermarket that is very value-focused in their offering. We can provide an offering that can really fill that significant gap between those extremes, and we can do it in a manner that is economically rewarding for our retail partners. So it’s not cannibalizing their strategy, but we’re providing an offering to consumers that is not being as well met today as it could be.”

To enhance its product offering, Just Desserts is experimenting with new flavor profiles. It wants to appeal to consumers who like savory tastes in their baked goods, so its products are available at other times of the day.

“We've got some interesting things in the pipeline that would appeal to consumers who like a savory flavor profile in their baked goods,” Mendes announces. “While flavor, and then the product is seasoned in an unexpected, savory manner.”

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