

The Clean-Label Innovator

Just Desserts satisfies consumer cravings with a novel approach to familiar products, and expands its successful line of premium vegan baked goods. *BY STACI DAVIDSON*



JUST DESSERTS' RECENT EQUIPMENT INVESTMENTS INCLUDED A 55-FOOT BABBCO AIR IMPINGEMENT TUNNEL OVEN.

IN LATE 2019, THE AMERICAN BAKERY Association released a report saying consumers are looking for indulgent and sweet items, particularly those demonstrating high levels of quality and taste. The products from Just Desserts reflect those attributes well, and the company continues to innovate, to the delight of a broad range of consumers. In fact, with the quality and attention Just Desserts puts into its products, which are “always hand crafted and baked from scratch,” the artisan-inspired company is offering a wide range of products that much of the bakery industry has not.

“We’ve worked to distinguish ourselves nationally as a premium clean-label brand in the bakery category, with a loyal and growing consumer following,” CEO Michael Mendes explains. “We were founded in 1974 with an iconic corner bakery café in San Francisco. Just Desserts was offering all-natural baked goods long before it was popular, and our origins were built on a clean-label promise. We make our products from scratch. We look to source premium natural ingredients, and design each product for an optimal flavor and texture profile. Our cake batters, for example, have a high specific gravity resulting in a dense and rich cake layer, which has a tight grain and little to no tunneling. We strictly avoid the use of artificial leavening chemicals, which are designed solely to reduce cost. As a result, our cakes are decadent and rich, yet don’t have the aftertaste that can occur with artificial ingredients. While others use the cake layer as primarily a carrier for icing, our cake base is designed to be an integral and distinctive feature of the dessert.”

JUST DESSERTS

justdesserts.com / **SPECIALTY:** Cakes, cupcakes and cake bites / **BEST PRACTICE:** Clean-label, premium goods

Michael Mendes, CEO: “People love baked goods and desserts, and our products make them feel better about their choices while still satisfying their urge.”





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Just Desserts provides its cakes, cupcakes, cake bites and minis to a range of retailers across the country. These goods are made with valued ingredients such as real vanilla, whole grain flour, premium chocolate, real butter, whole eggs and canola oil. Its signature icing is a rich, cream cheese frosting. Just Desserts avoids the use of artificial preservatives, fillers or artificial flavors. Since 2017, every product is made in its tree-nut-free and peanut-free facility.

“We learned the baking category didn’t have many bakeries that were nut-free, and we saw that as a real opportunity for us,” Mendes says. “It was a bold but risky move and we are proud that we made that change. It requires us to be very disciplined, assuring that nuts are strictly prohibited from our production facility. The company works with all vendors to protect the supply chain from nut exposure, helping mitigate any risk of contamination.”

NO COMPROMISES

“By providing an accessible, premium brand at the retail level, Just Desserts supports retailers’ challenges with labor, quality control and shrink,” Mendes notes. In addition to removing nuts and maintaining its artisan practices, Just Desserts strives to offer consumers qualities that are important to them when buying food. The company has a full line of CCOF certified organic, GMO-free products, as well as its newest offering of 100 percent, plant-based products. Just Desserts’ Vegan Midnight Chocolate Cake received Top Honors in Product Innovation at the 2019 International Bakery Industry Exhibition BEST in Baking Competition in Las Vegas.

“We have identified some unique solutions to making a great-tasting,

plant-based baked good where you’re not compromising flavor or texture,” Mendes says. “These products also have distinct packaging that conveys the premium nature of the product. While we are pleased to meet and exceed the requirements of the most discerning strictly vegan consumer, we are also looking to appeal to a larger demographic of consumers who may not identify as vegan, but who are looking to include more plant-based products in their diet. People love baked goods and desserts, and our products make them feel better about their choices while still satisfying their urge.”

Last year, Just Desserts facility was certified kosher by the Orthodox Union (OU), which ensures the highest standard of kosher certification. “It was a very rigorous process earning the OU certification. Not all kosher certification firms require this level of scrutiny, and we are working with them on an ongoing basis to maintain compliance to the highest standards,” Mendes notes.

“This is important to us. Just Desserts is a GFSI Certified facility, and recently earned an Excellent Rating from SQF, the highest rating possible. We are a better company today as a result of electing to work with some of the most demanding audit and certification firms in the industry, and we are committed to continuous improvement.”

FAMILIAR YET NOVEL

Prior to joining the bakery industry, Mendes had an extensive career in the global snack food industry, and he uses that experience to support Just Desserts’ growth. A key lesson he learned was that it is “much better to fail fast and early by critically studying and testing products before going to market,” he says. Recognizing it can be difficult to change consumers’ first impressions, Just Desserts values consumer research and rigorous product evaluation, searching for insight on nuanced aspects of taste, flavor, texture and visual appeal. Mendes and the Just Desserts marketing team



JUST DESSERTS PLANS AN EXPANSION OF ITS VEGAN LINE WITH MORE SINGLE-SERVE CUPCAKES, FOUR-COUNT CUPCAKES AND VEGAN BROWNIE BITES.



JUST DESSERTS MADE A MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR INVESTMENT IN ITS NEW NORTHERN CALIFORNIA BAKERY TO IMPROVE QUALITY AND INCREASED PRODUCTION CAPACITY.

work closely with critical retail partners to gain additional insights on shifting consumer preferences.

“We collaborate closely with our retail partners, who bring a wealth of insight and consumer shopping data metrics to help better inform our product development strategy,” he says. “Our concept is rather than provide a marginal quality product that is cheap, we work to develop a more premium product that consumers value, which in turn drives greater sales velocity and total revenue.”

Just Desserts recognizes the popularity of single-serve cupcakes is rapidly growing because consumers see value in individual choices. The company offers single-serve cakes as well as cupcakes in a variety of flavors such as carrot, cookies and cream, strawberry patch, chocolate fudge, lemon and key lime. The current vegan offering includes the Vegan Midnight Chocolate cake and Chocolate Dipped Vanilla Bundt cake, as well as the Vegan Midnight Chocolate cupcake and Vegan Black and White cupcake.

“In our product development, we like to create a bridge between familiarity and novelty,” Mendes says. “The items are always something familiar, yet with a unique twist. For example, we saw success with our pumpkin cake, so we developed a streusel-crust pumpkin coffee cake bite. We look to forge a fusion of complementary flavors and textures. Our dark chocolate enrobed raspberry filled chocolate cake is a prime example, and is now one of our best sellers.”

AUTOMATION TO COMPLEMENT ARTISAN

Just Desserts has a dedicated manufacturing facility, which covers 75,000 square feet of space on a five-acre location in Fairfield, Calif. This includes a new 12,000-square-foot high cube freezer. “Our state-of-the-art freezer allows us to freeze products rapidly, which results in the formation of smaller ice crystals,” Mendes explains. “This results in superior quality and maximum freshness when the product reaches the retail shelf.”

Just Desserts has made a multi-

million-dollar investment in its new Northern California Bakery, which has improved quality and increased production capacity. “We recognize that there are some repetitive motion tasks that are difficult for our employees, creates risk for injury, and are difficult to apply consistently and rapidly using a manual process. We have installed a robotic decoration system, which replicates the artisan visual appeal of some of our hand decorating processes, while preserving our skilled decorators for more delicate final finishing decorating, which increases quality and productivity while being cost efficient.”

Some of Just Desserts’ recent investments have included a large scale 800L Tonelli Planetary Mixer, A 55-foot Babbco Air Impingement Tunnel Oven, Bakon Enrober, Hinds-Boch Depositors, and new Unifiller Decorating systems. “We have been fortunate to work with some great partners who have helped us optimize quality while dramatically increasing our productivity and cost efficiency. This has been critical in the face of rapidly rising labor cost and other inputs, and we have been able to pass these savings onto our customers.”

Just Desserts will never compromise quality to reduce costs, Mendes stresses, but will continue to automate in order to drive productivity and create better value for consumers.

CONTINUED APPEAL

Going forward, Just Desserts plans an expansion of its vegan line with more single-serve cupcakes, four-count cupcakes and vegan brownie bites. The company’s goal is to appeal to the broader market who value plant-based products, yet are unwilling to sacrifice flavor and texture. **BP**