

fried steak with french fries can easily become steak *frites*. Adding mushrooms to macaroni-and-cheese can recreate the classic *gratin de macaroni aux champignons sauvages*. Bumping up the number of creamy calories in tomato purée yields French-style bisque. The dessert cheese platter, a mainstay in France, is quickly becoming popular here. Higher-price-point chains could benefit from offering a dessert cheese platter that uses suitable cheeses and fruits already on their menus.

### REALIZING FRENCH RETAIL

American shoppers increasingly seek products that allow them to quickly create gourmet, upscale meals at home for family and friends. French-inspired retail products, like different types of heat-and-eat quiche and jarred Hollandaise sauce, are mostly imported from Europe and Canada, but they are great examples of what U.S. manufacturers could start making. Crêpes, the indigenous dish of Brittany, are extremely easy to make—but who has the time? A few manufacturers have already begun selling frozen sweet and savory crêpes. Consumers are willing to pay more money for these shortcuts, because it's still cheaper than eating out.

Single-serving desserts are available in thaw-and-eat retail packs. These could be embellished with retail squeeze bottles of fruit *coulis* (purée). Not a common supermarket item, fruit purées can be sold refrigerated or frozen, and shelf life can be extended with sorbic or benzoic acid to prevent yeast and mold outgrowth.

Some of the classic country-style dinners in France include cassoulet, beef bourguignon and coq au vin. All of these dishes can be made using the same process as other shelf-stable, low-acid foods. They can be packed into cans, hermetically sealed under vacuum and retorted to temperatures near 240°F for sufficient time to achieve commercial sterility. The supermarket selection of precooked, frozen meals would also benefit from some French-inspired foods. Frozen-

food manufacturers can infuse many of the simple ingredients already used in other frozen dinners—like roasted chicken, potatoes, beans, pork loin and mushrooms—with appropriate wine-based sauces and other French flavors.

French food is, by nature, both gourmet and rustic. The absence of French dishes in our supermarkets and restaurant chains, combined with our long-standing perception of it as an “expensive dinner out,” gives the cuisine an aura of mystery and sophistication that many of the other, overused ethnic concepts will never recoup. To keep casual dining and retail foods interesting, we have to keep digging into those underutilized, manufacturer-friendly items that can so easily be transformed into affordable mainstream cuisines. French can be the next Mexican or Asian dining trend, and the proverbial French doors are wide open to anyone interested in walking boldly through them. ●

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