

FOOD

Cereal, a Taste of Nostalgia, Looks for Its Next Chapter

By KIM SEVERSON FEB. 22, 2016

King Vitaman and I were tight when I was young. Sweetened cereals were a rarity in my house, so beating my siblings to breakfast was the only way to make sure the king and I would have some time together.

I got up early to follow his animated adventures on the back of the box. Even the ingredient list, with its parade of unintelligible words and the promise of a full day's supply of vitamins and iron, seemed endlessly fascinating. I was rapt until the bowl was empty and his sugarcoated golden crowns had turned the milk to syrup.

Now, I watch my young daughter stare at her cereal box in the morning, pondering a stalk of organic wheat or the plight of a koala. I wonder if she will ever have the sentimental pleasure of her own King Vitaman.

Breakfast cereal is a powerful engine of nostalgia — the warm, helpful kind, not the morose, depressive kind. The relationship starts with babies, who use Cheerios like Bitcoin, and stretches into old age. Almost half of all American baby boomers and nearly 40 percent of the generation born before them say the cereals they loved as children remain their favorites, according to an August 2015 report by Mintel, the global market research company.

But breakfast cereal, both as a cultural marker and a profit center, is at a crossroads. Since the late 1990s, its popularity has been slowly fading. Sales, which totaled \$13.9 billion in 2000, dipped last year to about \$10 billion.

Younger consumers are not as attached to cold cereal for breakfast as their forebears, analysts and cereal makers agree. They either don't eat breakfast at all, or eat it somewhere other than home. And when they do eat breakfast, a bowl of cold cereal is often replaced by hot grains, smoothies, yogurt or breakfast sandwiches.

Some analysts, like Euromonitor, predict that cereal will continue its slide, while others, like Packaged Facts, are forecasting a turnaround. So are the big cereal producers. This month, John A. Bryant, the Kellogg Company's chief executive, predicted that its cereal sales in the United States would actually grow by 1 or 2 percent this year.

Although breakfast cereal seems simple enough, fitting the right one with the right customer has become a challenge in an age of niche preferences, when even the specific grain and where it came from are critical to shoppers.

“The cereal category is certainly shifting,” said Melissa Abbott, director of culinary insights for the Hartman Group, a consumer food research organization. “Consumers over all are less interested in

industrially processed grains as a meaningful start to their day.”

Some organic and other brands perceived as more healthful are selling well, so General Mills has added three organic cereals to its Annie’s line of children’s foods. By April, it hopes to introduce Frosted Oat Flakes, Berry Bunnies and Cocoa Bunnies in Whole Foods stores.

Kellogg’s, which Mr. Bryant told investors this month had not always been on top of consumer tastes, is banking on a better mix of healthful cereals. It has just introduced a Nourish line of Special K with quinoa, and is looking at ways to repackage cereal into single servings and more eco-friendly bags.

The dream of all these companies is to capture the all-powerful and elusive millennial eater, who just isn’t all that into cereal for breakfast. It’s just too much work, for one thing. Almost 40 percent of the millennials surveyed by Mintel for its 2015 report said cereal was an inconvenient breakfast choice because they had to clean up after eating it.

In the college cafeteria, eating any cereal you want for three meals a day is no longer a rite of passage. Bon Appétit Management Company, the California food service firm whose clients include tech giants like Google and more than 100 college campuses, said other options were preferred at breakfast. Locally made granola, protein bars and hot cereals like congee or oatmeal are popular.

The cold cereals that baby boomers grew up on have been relegated to a category called “comfort brands,” and Bon Appétit offers only a couple of choices on its traditional cafeteria lines. At Emory University in Atlanta, it’s Raisin Bran and Lucky Charms. Cheerios are served not because everyone has loved them since childhood, but because they are gluten free. The organic offering is Kashi Sweet Potato Sunshine. (At other places on campus, the company does sell a wider array of cereals like Frosted Flakes and Golden

Grahams.)

Still, this generation of young people may be the ones who save cereal. But it probably won't be because they are eating it for breakfast, or because they are moved by vague claims of health, nutrition or environmental impact. Millennials are snackers, and not easily fooled by packaging or advertising, but they are as nostalgia-driven as any group of cereal eaters.

"I literally had three bowls of cereal for dinner last night," said Christina Tosi, the New York pastry chef who founded the Milk Bar cafes and made the milk left in the bottom of a cereal bowl a culinary phenomenon by turning it into ice cream. She is a big fan of Lucky Charms and Frosted Flakes.

Ms. Tosi, 34, could be considered either a member of Generation X or a millennial. Like many people her age, she thinks of cereal more as a creative outlet or a way to dip into the past than as breakfast.

Since the business began slumping in the 1990s, cereal companies have been trying to position cereal as something other than breakfast, putting it into crackers and snack bars. But Ms. Tosi, who consults for Kellogg's, said they haven't exploited all the various ways cereal is being used.

"They have to embrace that people love the flavor and texture of cereal and the vintage nature, but it's not about breakfast," Ms. Tosi said.

Ms. Tosi is not the first to play with cereal in the professional kitchen. A decade ago, the chef Ferran Adrià of the innovative El Bulli restaurant in Spain poured a rich reduced seafood broth over Rice Krispies for a dish called Kellogg's paella.

Off-market uses for cereal have seemed to accelerate recently. Last year, the Bedrock Fizz at the Eddy

restaurant developed a fan base among young New Yorkers who appreciated a \$16 cocktail infused with Fruity Pebbles. Trisha Yearwood, the country singer who is also a cooking celebrity, created a cocktail in which she infused milk with Cinnamon Toast Crunch cereal and mixed it with Fireball Cinnamon Whisky.

Cereal manufacturers are starting to catch on. Recently, Kellogg paid a young, culturally diverse group of chefs to create dishes using its cereals. Among them was Danny Bowien, the man behind Mission Chinese Food in New York and San Francisco, and a lifelong Corn Flakes fan. For a special breakfast menu he served in December, Mr. Bowien matched Frosted Flakes with matcha milk and green tea powder, and poured bacon-infused soy milk over Corn Pops, topping the dish with a fried egg.

Fancy cocktails and cutting-edge cuisine may not do much to budge sales figures. But the chefs may lend breakfast cereal some needed cachet — and visibility — if only by eating it.

Kyle Mendenhall, the executive chef of the Kitchen, a restaurant group in Boulder, Colo., likes to pour cream or whole milk over Honey Nut Cheerios, the nation's top-selling brand.

“Every chef is probably a cereal guy,” he said, “because 90 percent of them go home at 2 in the morning and eat what's there because they don't want to cook anymore.”

Read more about the history of breakfast cereal.

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