

Food R&D

PEOPLE, PRODUCTS AND COMPANIES SHAPING FOOD DEVELOPMENT

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WINNERS AND LOSERS

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For some time, a good number of American consumers have been under the impression that bigger is better. This philosophy has been perpetuated by processors' and marketers' catering to them by introducing bigger products in bigger packages. Examples of this can be seen throughout the marketplace in grocery stores, convenience stores, fast food chains and, most obviously, ware-



Patrice Ventresca has created fresh-frozen vegetable bases with a gourmet flair for a variety of entrees: *One-Step Kitchen Masterpieces*.

house clubs, which are popping up like *Boston Chicken* outlets.

I have been seduced by the *Big Gulp*, *McDonald's Super Size* items and *Frito-Lay Big Grabs*. I shop at the warehouse grocery stores and buy vast quantities of many things in an effort to save money.

I think there are limits, however, when it comes to "big." A prime example is a new product from Vienna Sausage Manufacturing Co. (Vienna Beef). The Chicago-based hot dog maker is introducing *Bigfoot*, a 12-in. half-pound hot dog made with domestic beef and sweet brisket trimmings. The company suggests serving this whopping weenie on a 6-in. or 9-in. bun, with simple toppings like mustard or ketchup, or with the full "Chicago-style" garnish medley which includes mustard, relish, onion, tomato, pickles and peppers. Each hot dog accounts for four servings on the nutrition information label, has 600 calories and 52 grams of fat. That's more than 75 percent of the total fat recommended for an entire day. A little excessive? I can't help but wonder where this product will find an audience. I highly doubt Moms would feed these monster dogs to their kids due to the sheer size. The image of Cubs fans passing them down a row at a game is funny, albeit unlikely. Regardless, it will be interesting to see what happens to this oversized idea.

I can't be too hard on Vienna, however, because the company also has developed a winning new product — the *Chicago Firedog*. Not only is the name catchy, but this unique hot dog made with cayenne peppers and a host of seasonings is an excellent detour from your everyday dog. It's hot — but

not too hot for most palates. Vienna suggests adding more sizzle to the *Firedog* (though it's not really needed), by adding hot sauce and peppers on a steamed poppyseed bun. My bet is that the *Firedog* would be a great substitute for any recipe that calls for sausage.

New gourmet food companies also are popular and certified chef-turned entrepreneurs are today a common breed. Patrice Ventresca is one of these risk takers. Her expanding line of *One-Step Kitchen Masterpieces*, freshly made and frozen sauces and bases, merits special mention. The Mountain View, Calif.-based company, Via Ventresca, was founded last year and her first three products were introduced earlier this year at the Fancy Foods Show in San Francisco. Since then, her line has doubled in size and continues to grow as she moves items from her Splendid Feast Catering company menu into retail. Her products include pasta sauces such as *Garden of Vegetables Pasta Sauce* and *Country Garden Olive-Caper Pasta Sauce* and entree bases (to which you add seafood, chicken or beef) such as *Punjabi Curry Sauce*, *Bouillabaisse*, *Thai Basil Sauce* and *Mushroom Risotto*. Every item is all natural, low in fat and calories and



Vienna Beef's new *Chicago Firedog* can be eaten alone or used to spice up a dish.

preservative free, with unique ingredients such as wild onions, roasted walnuts, ginger root, pumpkin seed and okra. The 1-lb. package, which retails for \$5, serves two people and is currently available in grocery freezer cases in select Northern California stores and the Pacific Northwest. The fresh, healthy ingredients, ease of preparation (just heat and add meat), combined with Ventresca's culinary expertise make these products a winner. Keep an eye out for more Via Ventresca *One-Step Kitchen Masterpieces* to be introduced, such as *Jambalaya*, *Paella*, *Caribbean Pepperpot* and *Creole Seafood Gumbo*.

Hint: These easy entrees work especially well if it's your night to cook and you're on the lookout for an easy, great tasting and healthy dish that looks homemade. The unique ingredients give the kitchen the "I made a special trip to the gourmet food store" aroma as well as contribute well to the all-around illusion that you are learning how to cook in your spare time. It worked for me. ■