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Tea

Organic teas, latte mixes, herbs, fruits and spices--however you stir it, teas are exotic, enticing and steeping in opportunity. In fact, the \$6.8 billion tea industry is one of the strongest beverage markets, on track to reach \$10 billion by 2010, according to Don Montuori, acquisitions editor at [Packaged Facts](#), a Rockville, Maryland, publisher of consumer [market research](#).

Especially hot right now are ready-to-drink red, green and white specialty teas, which boast certain health properties. And they can be healthy for your bottom line, too, as Andy Schamisso, 42, discovered when he founded [Inko's White Tea](#) in 2002.

Spying a niche, he developed a line of bottled white teas and enjoyed virtually zero competition for the first two years. The head start helped, and he recently introduced four new flavors: apricot, cherry vanilla, litchi and unsweetened honeysuckle. Now the only color this New York City-based white tea manufacturer sees is green, with projected 2005 sales of \$2 million to \$3 million. "Tea is a very exciting [business](#)," says Schamisso.

If a tea shop is more your style, Montuori advises setting up in a densely populated, youthful area and offering a wide variety of specialty teas. And if you're wondering whether tea shops are hip, consider Moby: The popular musician sent tea's cool factor sky-high when he opened trendy New York City tea cafe Teany in 2002.

Online Specialty Foods

Don't expect American consumers to settle for french fries and hamburgers anymore. Their taste buds--especially those of 25- to 34-year-olds--are becoming as specialized as their lifestyles are high-tech. As a result, they're increasingly turning to the internet for specialty foods ranging from gourmet cheeses and fine wines to gluten-free and diabetic-friendly products. "Younger generations are more likely to treat themselves every day, and that has fueled a lot of increase in specialty food," says Ron Tanner, vice president of [communications](#) and education at the [National Association for the Specialty Food Trade Inc.](#) in New York City.

According to Tanner, the retail specialty food business is a \$24.7 billion industry that grew 17.9 percent between 2002 and 2004. Enjoying that growth are Sean Sullivan, 43, and Bill Fox, 46, who founded [1-800-Gourmet](#), a Cleveland-based online wholesaler and retailer of specialty foods, in 1999. The demand for their more than 3,000 items, from black truffles and pure saffron to Fair Trade jams, is best illustrated by their six-digit 2005 [sales](#) figures. Surprisingly, the majority of their current clients are men.

Perhaps even more surprising than men doing the grocery shopping, though, were the Supreme Court rulings earlier this year allowing interstate wine shipments. Let's drink to this new development, which should keep consumers clicking.

Do-It-Yourself Meal Preparation

Let's face it--we like things good, fast and easy. Hectic schedules barely leave enough time to eat, let alone cook. According to a 2005 national survey commissioned by ConAgra Foods Inc., an Omaha, Nebraska, packaged-food company, more than 70 percent of parents experience some type of stress associated with dinnertime.

The SOS hasn't gone unnoticed. Entrepreneurs are bringing a new concept to the table: DIY meal preparation. [Customers](#) attend sessions where, in just a couple of hours, they whip up enough meals to last a month. Once frozen, those meals become no-hassle dinners at a later date. Offering fun, stress-free cooking, this business idea has reached a boiling point, with franchises like Dinner By Design and Dream Dinners helping to spur growth.

Ron Paul, president of [Technomic Inc.](#), a Chicago-based consulting and research firm for the food industry, believes the secret ingredient for success is the menu. "Offer a variety of choices so you're not turning off a consumer who wants fish, red meat or a vegetarian meal," he advises. "Offer all those alternatives to make sure you have the widest possible appeal." If your dishes are diverse, you should have no trouble finding your way straight to customers' hearts (and stomachs).

One-Product Restaurants

Specialization is the next stage of evolution in the restaurant industry, says Aaron Allen, founder and CEO of Orlando, Florida-based [Quantified Marketing Group](#), a strategic marketing and PR firm for the restaurant industry. So bring on the restaurants selling only cream puffs, soup or cereal. Americans are hungry for them.

Jodene Jensen, 39, Ken Hall, 36, and Keri Barney, 36, gambled big when they opened P.B.Loco, a restaurant in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 2003. Some thought their idea for a restaurant specializing in peanut butter was nuts, but these former lawyers were confident they could strike it rich by giving a classic commodity a modern taste. They opened their first cafe in Minnesota's Mall of America, featuring low-carb wraps and unique sandwiches like "The Wacko," which combines Asian Curry Spice Peanut Butter with pickles, coconut and potato chips. Sound good? It's tasty enough that [P.B.Loco](#) has since become a multimillion-dollar business, with franchises selling faster than peanuts at a baseball game. Says Hall, "People feel very passionately about peanut butter."

Choose an adaptable product, find a niche, and get to know as much about the product as possible. "You have to be an expert in a particular area," says Allen. Do this, and you'll certainly stand out in the restaurant world, which has become, according to Allen, a \$430 billion-per-year industry.

Chocolate Cafes

What's hot? Chocolate. What's not? Obsessing over calories. Just when Americans are about to make their New Year's resolutions, a sweet concept is tempting the nation. "People have wanted to indulge in having a little chocolate treat for a while, and [chocolate cafes] are an extension of that," says Susan Smith, senior vice president of public affairs for the [Chocolate Manufacturers Association](#). Basing its numbers on Department of Commerce statistics, the Vienna, Virginia, association reports sales for chocolate candy products increased 5.6 percent last year to \$15.3 billion.

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America has a sweet tooth--leaving entrepreneurs with an opportunity to satisfy it. Mary and Norman Love, both 46, founded [Norman Love Confections](#), a Fort Myers, Florida, confectionary manufacturer, in 2001. They gave customers more reason to indulge with the Chocolate Salon in 2004. Customers flock to experience ultrapremium handmade chocolates, pastries and hot cocoa featuring grated chocolate from faraway European lands. Says Norman, "People will drive one hour to sit down and eat a pastry that's an absolute artistic masterpiece."

For those thinking of joining the craze, Norman divulges a tantalizing secret: Make the goods on-site. The Chocolate Salon features a five-foot-long window through which customers can watch the chocolatiers in motion. With plans to open two more Salons by 2007 and \$3 million in sales projected for this year, the Loves are having a sweet time. So step aside, Starbucks: Caffeine buzzes may be no match for sugar highs.--Sara Wilson

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