

How Did Pumpkin Spice Become So Popular? And Why Do We Hate to Love It So Much?

Turns out, pumpkin spice has a long and storied past (not all of which revolves around lattes).

By **CookingLight** August 24, 2019

Love it or hate it, the cultural phenomenon known as the PSL is thriving. And if you think you're tired of hearing about it, just thank your lucky stars you don't work in the flavor industry.

Ever since the pumpkin pie spice-spiked espresso drink hit the scene, food and beverage companies have been trying to emulate its success, which means analyzing what made it so popular to begin with. Straight out of the gates of the Liquid Lab at Starbucks HQ in Seattle, the latte was in high demand, and it has weathered criticism to remain the chain's top-selling seasonal beverage of all time with more than 350 million sold to date. That such a quirky flavor did so well was something few could have predicted. Sure, pumpkin pie is good, but it never even breaks the

top five in polls on America's favorite desserts. It's somewhat niche, too, with more than 95 percent of the spice blend's sales occurring between August and November, according to McCormick, the company that originated Pumpkin Pie Spice—a blend of cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and allspice—in 1934 as a shortcut for flavoring the traditional harvest dessert.

That short, seasonal window of enjoyment may be part of the allure, says Kara Nielsen, a trendologist for the food and beverage industry. "There always were these seasonal flavors offered for a limited time as a way to drive business. Fast food does it all the time," she says, pointing to the McDonald's Shamrock Shake. And mint, she points out, is a little less special of a flavor, given that it's a top choice for everyday things like gum and mouthwash.

There are both economic (scarcity, supply and demand) and psychological (something called reactance) explanations for why we're drawn to

foods that aren't available year-round, but neither completely explains why the PSL has its own Twitter feed (it was established in 2014, and it's a verified account).

"There's no logical reason to put pumpkin in a cup of coffee," says Cindy Ott, Ph. D., author of *Pumpkin: The Curious History of an American Icon*, who gets grilled about the PSL every year. Her theory? We're celebrating "the symbol of pumpkin rather than the substance of it."

Pumpkins, it turns out, are very symbolic in American culture. They're the oldest domesticated plant in the new world, and helped sustain colonists when the crops they brought from Europe failed. Later, when people moved into cities, pumpkins remained associated with that agrarian way of life in a nostalgic, almost romantic way. It's the same today, when we purchase decorative gourds to give our entryways a rustic makeover for fall.

Of course, no one's consciously seeking that association out when they order a latte. But that undeniably connection to home and hearth is so ingrained in our culture, it's an intrinsic part of what people love about PSLs.

And what they hate about them. "It's easy to make fun of the cozy rural life and domesticity pumpkins represent," says Ott. "No one gets up on their high horse about eggnog lattes or peppermint mochas." Which may be partly why PSLs have been mocked as "basic," and become props for memes about leggings-clad, Ugg-wearing white girls. Now, drinking one is almost an ironic statement.

Part of the ire is also simply due to the proliferation of pumpkin spice everything. "Success breeds copycat behavior," Nielsen says. McCormick started to see a significant uptick in sales of Pumpkin Pie Spice (a more than 80 percent increase) in 2011, and soon coffee drinks were joined by snack foods, cereal, booze, and protein powder. "Last year, we saw pumpkin pie pet shampoo for the first time, which was quite surprising," says Jill Pratt,

McCormick's vice president of North America
Marketing Excellence.

Such product innovation ventures into what Nielsen calls "eyeball-rolling territory" and speaks to just how competitive the food and beverage landscape is these days. With a customer base driven by novelty, not loyalty, everyone's trying to invent the next PSL. God help us all if anyone succeeds.