

Summer of Intelligence Lunch 'n Learn Series

The Grand Finale and Awards Presentation

August 26th 2026

Patricia Menegoto, StartupCPG

Adam Yee, Food Scientist

Sam Cary, Specialty Food Association

Guest:

Sheri Castle, The Key Ingredient

The NCSFA summer conference concluded with a grand finale featuring presentations on specialty food, consumer packaging, marketing, product development, industry trends, and membership resources, followed by door-prize and Best in Taste Awards announcements.

Patricia Menegoto of Startup CPG introduced the organization's free Slack community of more than 38,000 CPG founders, buyers, experts, media professionals, and investors, emphasizing its practical peer support, trade-show preparation, buyer introductions, networking, collaborations, Selfie Awards, Grocery Run events, and educational programming. She advised brands to establish clear trade-show goals, research attending buyers, schedule meetings in advance, use branded apparel as a marketing tool, and actively build relationships with founders, creators, and customers.

She also highlighted trends including coffee and matcha sodas, low- and no-caffeine products, protein and fiber, bone broth, dates, cottage cheese, and women's health, while recommending timely media outreach for relevant trends and gift guides, batch content creation, automated email flows such as welcome, abandoned-cart, and replenishment campaigns, and authentic community engagement.

Food scientist and product-development consultant Adam Yee discussed his work helping emerging brands develop scalable products, drawing on experience as a founder, consultant, podcaster, and graduate student at NC State. He identified protein and fiber, cottage cheese, GLP-1-related products, AI-based search optimization, natural flavors and taste modulation, sugar alternatives, dates, chili crisp, salsa macha, and sweet-spicy flavors as important areas to monitor.

He also cautioned that rising demand can create supply-chain constraints, citing record-high whey protein prices, beef availability concerns, and limited cottage cheese capacity, and encouraged brands to evaluate ingredient functionality, cost, scalability, and quality rather than relying solely on popular claims.

Sam Cary of the Specialty Food Association presented trends from the Summer Fancy Food Show, including global flavors applied to familiar comfort foods, transparent “inside-out” innovation centered on recognizable ingredients, bite-sized foods designed for flavor density and changing eating habits, renewed interest in heritage and traditional foods, handcrafted packaging aesthetics, and playful packaging formats that create new usage occasions.

She also reviewed SFA membership benefits, including access to flagship trade shows, networking and mentorship, consumer and industry research, trend reports, regulatory and legal resources, educational webinars and courses, press-release distribution, media and influencer connections, member spotlights, professional product photography, the SoFi Awards, Good Food Awards support, and discounts or services from business providers.

Sheri Castle then announced the door-prize recipients and the 2026 Best in Taste Awards winners, with category honors spanning baked goods, barbecue sauces, beverages, condiments, confections, deli meats and dairy, fruit spreads, hot sauces, pantry products, plant-based foods, snacks, and sweeteners; Big Spoon Roasters’ Vanilla Latte Almond Butter received the Grand Champion award.

The session closed with appreciation for the presenters, judges, organizers, Hampton Farms, and attendees, with a recording and presentation materials to be distributed afterward.