

# Clean-label products take top honors for 2016

The top global brand of cookies and an upstart ready-to-eat popcorn company find commonality in clean label.

Douglas J. Peckenpaugh, Chief Editor

In 2015, we launched the “Best New Snack & Bakery Products” awards on [www.snackandbakery.com](http://www.snackandbakery.com) to honor outstanding new snack and bakery products that are making waves across the industry. These are some of the most-popular products on [www.snackandbakery.com](http://www.snackandbakery.com)—and in homes across the U.S.

For the inaugural awards, two gluten-free products emerged with top honors, a fitting result considering the creative momentum of gluten-free product launches within the historically wheat-focused grain and bakery markets.

The products on the respective snack and bakery Best New Snack & Bakery Products of 2016 ballots represented nearly every major trend across snack and bakery today, including clean label, portion control, gluten-free, seasonality, organic, bold and global flavors, better-for-you, and convenience.

As was the case in 2015, the voting for 2016 proved revealing. The 2016 Best New Snack & Bakery Products voting yielded results that nicely mesh with a top trend in

the industry. This year, it's clean label taking the lead, with both winning products—The Little Kernel Mini Popcorn and Keebler Simply Made Cookie Thins—taking a decisive approach toward offering clean, clear ingredient statements.

These similarities unify—and their differences also serve as a galvanizing element for the industry as a whole. The two products taking top honors for 2016 are from two completely different worlds, a universal reminder of the importance of clean label moving forward. On the snack side, The Little Kernel is a new startup snack producer, not yet a year old as a company and already turning heads. On the bakery side, Simply Made Cookie Thins took top honors—a product line from the largest cookie and cracker producer in the U.S. brand in the world, Keebler, a company that dates back to the 1850s and today is a subsidiary of food-industry giant, The Kellogg Co. The Keebler Elves, created by ad-land heavyweight Leo Burnett in the 1960s, are synonymous with cookies across

the U.S. and beyond.

Yet both companies seek to capture the attention of shoppers hungry for simplicity and transparency, for streamlined approaches toward ingredient selection that don't pose any guesswork. As FMI and The Hartman Group noted in their 2016 “U.S. Grocery Shopping Trends” report, “fresh, less processed” foods are a top priority for people today, with 65 percent of shoppers seeking products with ingredient traits like no artificial ingredients, no preservatives, non-GMO, natural, no high-fructose corn syrup, certified organic and gluten-free. Collectively, these ingredient parameters equate to clean label, and will serve as a primary area of product development across snack and bakery moving forward.

In order to learn more about The Little Kernel and Keebler Simply Made Cookie Thins, we reached out to Chris Laurita, co-founder of The Little Kernel (Andy Epstein is the other co-founder), and Jane Ghosh, senior director, Kellogg Snacks Marketing.



the **LITTLE  
KERNEL**



### The Little Kernel Mini Popcorn

**Company:** The Little Kernel, Manalapan, NJ

**Website:** www.thelittlekernel.com

**Introduced:** May 2016

**Distribution:** National

**Suggested Retail Price:** \$3.99

**Product Snapshot:** This miniature popcorn line is popped in 100 percent olive oil. The Little Kernel is gluten-free, dairy-free, non-GMO and kosher, and is available in six all-natural flavors: Naked, Truffle Sea Salt, Sweet and Salty Kettle, Pink Himalayan Salt, Butter, and White Cheddar. The Little Kernel made its debut on an episode of “The Real Housewives of New Jersey.” In the episode, cast member Jacqueline Laurita’s husband, Chris (a

co-founder of The Little Kernel), is working on the branding and packaging of a snack startup company. Chris explains that the inspiration for the brand came from his son, Nicholas, who is autistic and follows a gluten-free diet as part of his treatment. Popcorn is a great gluten free snack for Nicholas, but the pieces are too big for easy snacking, thus the idea for The Little Kernel was born. The Little Kernel is a proud supporter of Generation Rescue. A portion of all proceeds goes toward helping provide hope, information and immediate treatment assistance to families affected by autism spectrum disorders.

**Douglas J. Peckenpaugh:** What was the original idea behind The Little Kernel and its “Mini Popcorn” products?

**Chris Laurita:** We researched all types of snacks and felt the “mini kernels” had great attributes and fit perfectly into our desire to develop a better-for-you brand.

**DJP:** Is the popcorn used in the products a different variety that has been bred to pop smaller than typical popcorn types?

**CL:** Yes! It is an heirloom variety called Lady Finger. It’s a bit more difficult to grow with much lower yields.

**DJP:** How is the flavor of just the plain popped kernels different than regular popcorn?

**CL:** We believe that it’s much better! The smaller kernels are denser, giving them a great flavor profile. When we combine it with 100 percent pure olive oil in the kettle, the outcome is a crunchier, truly delicious snack!

**DJP:** Does using this particular variety

of popcorn pose any raw material sourcing issues?

**CL:** Yes. Because it’s more challenging to harvest, there are fewer growers. We have been fortunate in that we have partnered with some great people who have willingly shared their knowledge with other farmers to create our own family of farms.

**DJP:** How is reality TV star Jacqueline Laurita connected to the company?

**CL:** Jacqueline is my wife, and supports the philanthropic efforts of The Little Kernel.

**DJP:** How have the products been received by consumers?

**CL:** Once they try it, they’re addicted!

**DJP:** What does “clean label” mean to you as a company?

**CL:** Offering our consumers the best-quality, all-natural ingredients available.

**DJP:** Does following clean-label product

criteria pose any particular challenges during product development?

**CL:** It certainly limits our options, but we’re super-aggressive in finding the best ingredients available that meet our criteria.

**DJP:** Why are clean-label products growing more popular with some consumer segments?

**CL:** I believe because there is so much information out there regarding clean labels that people who wouldn’t normally be exposed to the concept are learning about them via the internet, social media and simply seeing the exciting, new, better-for-you offerings popping up at their traditional markets. They are curious and want to be a part of this exciting new frontier. You can’t ignore the facts, “better-for-you” is just that!

**DJP:** What are the flavors offered in the line?

**CL:** Naked (nothing but 100 percent pure olive oil), Pink Himalayan Salt, Truffle Sea Salt, White Cheddar (non-dairy), Butter (non-dairy) and Sweet & Salty.

**DJP:** How did you decide on these particular flavors?

**CL:** We considered the competitive set, trends and our own personal favorites.

**DJP:** Do you anticipate releasing any other flavors within this line?

**CL:** Absolutely! We have a great new addition to the flavor brigade coming out early 2017... S’mores with real mini marshmallows!

**DJP:** What’s next for The Little Kernel?

**CL:** We have our work cut out for us. The brand is only about 9 months old. We want to expand our distribution and continue to support the brand at retail through aggressive advertising and product sampling.



**Douglas J. Peckenpaugh:** What was the original idea behind the Keebler Simply Made Cookie Thins line?

**Jane Ghosh:** Consumers today continue to look for simple foods with real ingredients that they would typically find in their very own pantry. The Simply Made line from the Keebler Elves is crafted with this insight in mind, delivering really tasty cookies with an ingredient list that is transparent and recognizable. The Thins format is an emerging trend ... and the Elves were happy to oblige by applying their ingenuity to create these fabulous new cookies.

**DJP:** How have the products been received by consumers?

**JG:** This product has received very strong response as tracked by the Keebler consumer



### Keebler Simply Made Cookie Thins

**Company:** The Kellogg Co.,  
Battle Creek, MI

**Website:** www.keebler.com

**Introduced:** January 2016

**Distribution:** National

**Suggested Retail**

**Price:** \$3.69

**Product Snapshot:** Keebler, a Kellogg Co. brand, has launched two small, thin

cookies in response to the current trend for such treats. Simply Made Crispy Chocolate Chip and Simply Made Crispy Lemon Delight are made with simple, recognizable ingredients typically found in the kitchen, such as flour, eggs, butter and real sugar. A resealable, stand-up bag helps keep them fresh and crispy.



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affairs group. Consumers seem to love the flavors, new format and packaging. However, feedback from consumers is that Simply Made is difficult to find on the shelves. So, we've switched to more-straightforward Keebler Cookie Thins to help people find this delicious food. The food is not changing at all.

**DJP:** What does "Simply Made" mean in terms of permitted or prohibited ingredients?

**JG:** Simply Made is all about choosing ingredients that are recognizable. These are ingredients that consumers understand and would typically find in their very own pantries.

**DJP:** Did these ingredient parameters pose any challenges during product development?

**JG:** The Elves are an ingenious group of bakers, and they are always up to the challenge of meeting the needs of cookie-loving families across America. The team was committed to finding a recipe solution for these cookies that delivered outstanding taste, but also drives confidence with consumers in terms of ingredient profile. In the end, baking cookies with real, recognizable ingredients as an easy win for the team.

**DJP:** Why are "clean label" products growing more popular with some consumer segments?

**JG:** Consumers, particularly the emerging Millennial generation, are very keen to find wholesome foods with ingredients that make sense. We're seeing an emergence across many categories, and the Keebler Elves want

to ensure that even within the cookie aisle, a simple ingredient profile is available.

**DJP:** Why did you decide to use resealable stand-up pouch packaging for the Cookie Thins products?

**JG:** Freshness and storage within a homeowner's pantry are very important to the team. Resealable bags allow for consumers to keep their cookies fresh and the bag stores very well.

**DJP:** The line currently includes Crispy Chocolate Chip and Crispy Lemon Delight products. Do you anticipate releasing any other flavors within this line?

**JG:** The Elves are always up to new tricks and experiments ... keep an eye out there, you just may see a new delicious flavor soon! **SF&WB**



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