



CHARLIE BAGGS
Executive Chef & President
Charlie Baggs, Inc.
Chicago, Ill.

Establishing and Duplicating a Gold Standard

A “gold standard” is a benchmark measure in the product development process. It is the product against which all prototypes will be compared. It represents the flavor, texture, color, viscosity, and overall appearance that the product development team attempts to replicate. It should achieve the highest customer satisfaction, since it is a made-from-scratch, homemade-type recipe.

In preparing the gold standard, a well-trained, experienced professional chef uses classical cooking techniques and ingredients similar to those used in a restaurant or at home. The closer

the chef can prepare a gold standard with manufacturing ingredients and processes in mind, the smaller the bridge between the gold standard and the formulation of the prototype. This is where a research chef is valuable. Understanding the manufacturing process and culinary arts is a real skill that can enhance the development process.

In the development of a new or improved food product, the chef works closely with the product development team. This team may consist of one or more food scientists/technologists, representatives from the marketing and purchasing departments, vendors, and executives of the firm. Sometimes the project is driven by the marketing team, using consumer data, and other times by the R&D or purchasing department. The team sets parameters for the project, such as the target market, the end user, demographics, cost, time line, and how far out of the mainstream box the chef can conceptualize, to name a few.

It is critical to understand who the end users are going to be and how they will use the product. Is the end user a quick-service restaurant or a consumer at home? Will the product be marketed frozen, dehydrated, or shelf stable? What will the end user do with the product—reheat it, rehydrate it, bake it, stew it, microwave it, etc.? It is important to know what equipment will be used to prepare the product in the end user’s kitchen, since some national restaurant chain accounts do not have a stove.

Here’s how the chefs at Charlie Baggs, Inc., generally work with a product development team: The chef writes 24 concepts, and the team chooses 12. The chef prepares a gold standard for

each of the concepts selected, for the team to taste. The team then selects 3–6 to turn into a formulated prototype using industrial ingredients. The chef works closely with the team to develop the formulation for each prototype and compare the prototype against the gold standard.

For example, say a company wants a new frozen noodle bowl concept using turkey and vegetables. The company will give the chef parameters for the project, and the chef will present various written concepts for review by the team. One concept might be

Roasted turkey noodle bowl—tender chunks of roasted turkey simmered in savory/herb gravy with diced seasonal vegetables served over buttered noodles topped with Parmesan cheese. Variations of this concept might be the types of vegetables, the specific cut of the vegetables (e.g., oblique, julienne, half-inch diced, coin, etc.), type of noodle, specific herbs, cooking process (roasted, grilled, stewed, braised), and/or the type of sauce.

The product development team will then select several of the concepts for further development, and the chef will prepare a gold standard for each. The team will observe the chef preparing the gold standard, noting the techniques he or she

uses, the amount of browning, starches, vegetables, and anything else that would affect the product formulation.

Once the scientists observe the chef, review the recipe, and consolidate their notes, it is time to go to the bench. They will note specific characteristics like the amount of caramelizing, time of cooking, herbs used, stock used, etc., and incorporate this information into the prototype formula. The formula is then prepared and judged or tasted against the gold standard. This is a critical point in the development process. The chef can give valuable input here to tweak the flavors, texture, and overall product based on taste.

This process—from creating a gold standard to developing a prototype that closely replicates the gold standard—is critical in the development of a new or improved product. A company may have a concept in mind, but the chef’s input helps make that concept a reality. ●

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