



## Reflections of a River Rat:

### When supermarkets resemble a pumpkin patch

By Jim Holleran

I walked into my local supermarket on a mission. I was going to confirm my theory that consumers are slaves to the annual pumpkin spice brainwashing.



In the first display case inside the door, I was greeted by plain, old-fashioned pumpkin pie. This activated a fond memory -- Grandma Maxwell's pumpkin pie on the Thanksgiving table. This traditional treat was reserved for special occasions so it remained a coveted treat. This is what Mother Nature intended for pumpkin spice.

The farther I walked into the store, the more my tradition was trashed; my theory was confirmed. Sorry Grandma, you've been overwhelmed by The Charge of the Marketing Executives.

*Pumpkin spice to the right of me,  
Pumpkin spice to the left of me,  
Pumpkin spice in front of me.*

The farther I browsed, the more I detected that consumerism had run amok. I hadn't passed the next display case when I spied the

orange tub of Pumpkin Pie Cream Cheese. It shared a shelf with Pumpkin Pie Spice coffee creamer. They were displayed above the orange sign urging shoppers to "Celebrate the flavors of Fall." That's marketing ploy number one – wherever possible, use orange packaging. It speaks of fall and the fastest-growing holiday – Halloween.

Back in 2003, Starbucks tricked more than treated us with this orange explosion, introducing Pumpkin Spice Lattes to our consumer consciousness. Within 10 years, the retailer sold 200 million cups of this brew. Today, Starbucks reaps more than \$100 million annually from PSL sales.

The pumpkins spice latte explosion has detractors everywhere. The website Vox snarkily described PSLs as “an unctuous, pungent, saccharine brown liquid, equal parts dairy and diabetes, served in paper cups and guzzled down by the liter.” Vox also took a shot at 80 percent of PSL purchasers – women. It stated that pumpkin spice latte “is a highly delicious treat that pairs well with wearing vests and making dorky comments about how crisp the air feels today.”

PSL has also become the trendy joke and pun:

“Only two days into October and now even COVID is pumpkin spiced.”

“We bought Pumpkin Spice Motor Oil. It's for Autumnmobiles.”

“How do you cure someone with a pumpkin spice addiction? Apply the pumpkin patch.”

We American consumers associate pumpkin spice -- actually a blend of cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, mace and cloves — with the pie filling that McCormick began producing in the 1950s. But it goes back even earlier. The Washington Post issued a pumpkin spice cakes recipe in 1936. Further? Try a 1798 cookbook -- American Cookery -- that lists "pompkim pie." Further? The Dutch East India company began selling "speculaaskruiden," essentially pumpkin spice with cardamom and white pepper to the American colonies in the 17th century.



Back to my mission. How brainwashed have we become? How much have food producers messed with

our favorites? The answer occurred when I spotted one of the major food groups -- Twinkies. There they sat. Pumpkin Spice Twinkies. Yuck.

Haven't the hedge funds done enough? Production of these heavenly creme-filled sponge cakes were suspended in 2012 when a hedge fund bought the Hostess Brands. It took nine months to repopulate store shelves. These guys would tinker with Mona Lisa if they thought they could make an extra buck.



A few steps farther, I discovered Pumpkin Spice Ginger Snaps. I made way down the cereal aisle and was confronted by Special K Pumpkin Spice. Those will make you hurl in your Corn Flakes. Not far away was Pumpkin Spice Pop Tarts. Still, there was another food sacrilege worthy of 15 yards and a loss of down -- Pumpkin Spice Ice Cream. I wondered if even Ben & Jerry's would go that far? Sadly, they had — pumpkin cheesecake ice cream. There were pumpkin spice almonds and pumpkin spice marshmallows.

I felt I was walking a trail of devastation left by the fairy godmother of pumpkin spice -- Cruella de Cheesecake. But the dairy, bakery and cereal aisles paled when I entered the beer aisle. I almost fainted.

It read like a Murderers' Row, and I'm not talking the 1927 New York Yankees:

- Dogfish Head Pumpkin Ale
- Saranac Pumpkin Ale

- Journey to the Planet Pumpkin Ale
- Voodoo Ranger Atomic Pumpkin
- Munchen Pumpkin
- K2 Pumpkin Ale
- Shipyard Pumpkinhead
- Harpoon Dunkin Pumpkin

I turned with trepidation toward the Guinness display. Phew! No orange packaging, no pumpkin spice. Everything was right in my little corner of the world.



I'm sure there is plenty of research about consumer attraction to the pumpkin scent, or pumpkins being a rich source of antioxidants. But soon whackos will turn it into a conspiracy theory. It will resemble something such as Charlie Brown and Linus promoting the Great Pumpkin as a distraction so the government could slip pumpkin spice into your Covid-19 vaccine.

I won't be sampling any corrupted Twinkies or haunting Starbucks until I get a pumpkin spice latte. I don't give a sip.

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