

How (And Why) Oreo Keeps Coming Up With Crazy Limited-Edition Flavors

The classic cookie can't be beat, so why does Oreo keep releasing flavors like Watermelon and Carrot Cake?



Sadly, if you missed your chance to try Carrot Cake Oreos, they may never come back. Since March 6, 1912 (the day when the term Oreo was first used on the trademark forms and hence why that day is celebrated every year as National Oreo Day) Oreo has had a simple recipe for success: two chocolate cookies with one layer of creme. The world has changed quite a bit since Oreo debuted over 100 years ago, and now the brand must change, too. That's why the folks behind America's most enduring cookie are constantly releasing different colored and flavored Oreo cookies and cremes on supermarket shelves.

But why is Oreo messing with a good thing? How do they come up with flavors like Fruit Punch, Jelly Donut, Peeps, Watermelon, Swedish Fish and, umm, Love? To find out, we spoke to Justin Parnell, the senior marketing director for Oreo in the United States to learn how the brand comes up with those new flavors and the proposed flavors that Americans may never get to try.



Oreo's 100th birthday inadvertently sparked a flavor revolution.

Oreo released a lemon sandwich cookie back in the 1920s, but the company's modern-day obsession with new flavors truly began in 2012, when it celebrated a 100-year anniversary by launching Birthday Cake Oreo (chocolate sandwich cookies with birthday cake-flavored creme). "It was such a hit that we launched it as a permanent item," Parnell says. Like

any savvy brand, Oreo took this as a sign that the market was ready for more of the same.

Nowadays, it's an all-out battle for your money (and attention) in the supermarket snack food aisles, and Oreo has to stand out in order to stay at the top of every shopper's mind. One way to do that is through limited-edition cookies, which the company defines as an Oreo only available for four to six weeks.

"I think we continue to get better and better at launching flavors based on emerging trends we're seeing in the snacking world or in the dessert space, as well as flavors that really tap into what's happening in pop culture," Parnell said.



Releasing new flavors like Apple Pie and S'mores – the latter of which was such a huge hit in 2016 that Oreo is re-releasing it in late summer – are part of a strategy to excite consumers about a cookie invented in the early 20th century. But equally as important are the partnerships with other brands, like the birthday cake crème-flavored Mickey Mouse-themed cookies and the soon-to-be-released “Game of Thrones”-branded Oreo.

Limited-edition Oreos make a ton of dough.

But there's another important reason 14 limited-edition cookies are being released in 2019: they sell. Those cookies help contribute to the brand's \$3 billion in revenue in fiscal year 2018, according to Food Business News. Parnell says that the original Oreo is still its top-selling cookie, but the limited-edition flavors do more than just give people something to talk about. “Our Oreo flavor buyers buy 50 percent more Oreo than the average buyer,” he said. “We see that they're buying Oreo for more occasions, whether it's a holiday Oreo cookie for more festive occasions, the original cookie for those simple moments when you just want the good old classic or when we do something really different and exciting like a Peeps/Oreo partnership.”



The idea process to come up with exciting new Oreo flavors isn't one person's job: It's a team that includes food scientists and chefs in its East Hanover, New Jersey, headquarters. But the brand isn't just taking ideas from experts — it's open to listening to anyone. Like you, for example.

"The Most Stuf came out of a lot of comments on social media around the love of the creme," Parnell noted. "In fact, a couple of years ago the all creme Oreo was a joke on social media, and it spoke to the [public's] absolute love of the creme. Then there was an opportunity for us to take that insight and develop a product that they'd never seen before: the Most Stuf with the most creme ever." The cookie based on a joke paid off, as Parnell said it's one of the fastest selling limited-edition Oreos in the past few years.



The Most Stuf Oreo's dramatic visual impact has made it a big sensation on Instagram. Even ideas that seem like slam dunks take time to develop. "Once we've identified a winning concept, it takes anywhere between 12 to 18 months to market," he explained. "We have a dedicated team of marketers, researchers and product developers who are continually monitoring trends and coming up with new concepts."

They typically have 50 ideas in consideration at a time, and work on developing recipes and testing those ideas with the Oreo-buying public. "We test the flavors we've shortlisted among our Oreo buyers [in focus groups]," he said. But even if the new flavor appeals to hardcore fans, it doesn't mean it'll ever be released. "We want to ensure that it's not only appealing to our most loyal consumers, but also light buyers, or non-buyers of the brand," he noted. "We also want to ensure that it's appealing to younger consumers."

Not all the flavors are a hit, but that doesn't seem to matter.

I've tasted most of the limited-edition Oreo released in the last couple years, and while most of them were delicious, some were ... not my favorite. But one person's least favorite Oreo is another's treasure. "You have some that are going to appeal to a more narrow audience," Parnell said. "Even those play a role. Because typically we'll get a lot of buzz and excitement among a very passionate following. They still help to build the brand, and they help to make the brand contemporary and relevant." Even if you're talking smack about the latest Oreo cookie on Twitter, the company seems to be happy that you're talking about them.

The most innovative flavors never make it to store shelves in the U.S.

For the real Oreo connoisseur, hearing news about the types of cookies launching in international markets is a little disheartening. Sure, America gets some out-there flavors like Red Velvet Cake, but what about incredible sounding snacks like Hot Chicken Wing and Wasabi from China or Brazil's Torta de Limón (with lemon pie creme and chocolate cookies)?



Unfortunately, Brazil's Torta de Limón (with lemon pie creme and chocolate cookies) hasn't been available in the United States. "I think sometimes a flavor or an ingredient

might not be quite strong enough to have the kind of [domestic] demand that we would consider successful," Parnell noted. Sometimes limited-edition flavors are such a huge hit in the U.S.



that they're produced for other markets. Birthday Cake was eventually made available to the European market, for example. For the moment, it doesn't appear the demand for a spicy and savory Oreo internationally is replicated here in the U.S.

Oreo's next goal? Improving the cookie's visual impact.

Based on the amount of news coverage and social media chatter about new Oreo flavors, consumers can't get enough. But some of the most successful modern food trends on social media have a grabby visual element, from eye-popping ice cream to colorful poke bowls. Does that mean Oreo might try to change up its look beyond a different colored cookie or creme? Yes and no. "You'll never see a square Oreo," Parnell noted. While the cookie will always be round (or even egg-shaped in the case of the Peeps version), the brand is continuing to innovate when it comes to its look. "People love to share products that have a wow factor, and we're seeing that with the Most Stuf. They want to share it with their friends." So what's next? Oreo covered in edible glitter? A half Reese's/half Oreo mashup cookie? An Oreo that harnesses augmented reality? In order for the brand to stay relevant for another 100-plus years, they'll have to figure it out.

Questions:

1. What is March 6 considered National Oreo Day?
2. What did launching the Birthday Cake Oreo tell Nabisco about the market?
3. How long are limited edition cookies available?
4. How are sales for the limited edition cookies?
5. How many limited edition cookies will be released in 2019?
6. How much more cookies do Oreo flavor buyers buy versus average buyers?
7. Who comes up with the new flavors?
8. How long does it take for a new Oreo to come to market after identifying a winning concept?
9. How does Oreo use focus groups/marketing research?
10. What flavor(s) did NOT make it to the USA but sold in other countries?