

Czechs on the Run Break for U.S. Snack Foods

By Petra Chotěborská

It's almost a reflex in the United States—an outgrowth of our love affair with the automobile. Go to the gas mart, fill up the tank, fuel yourself with a snack. Bleary-eyed morning commuters guzzle coffee and indulge in a muffin or doughnut. Harried afternoon travelers grab caffeinated soft drinks and a bag of chips.

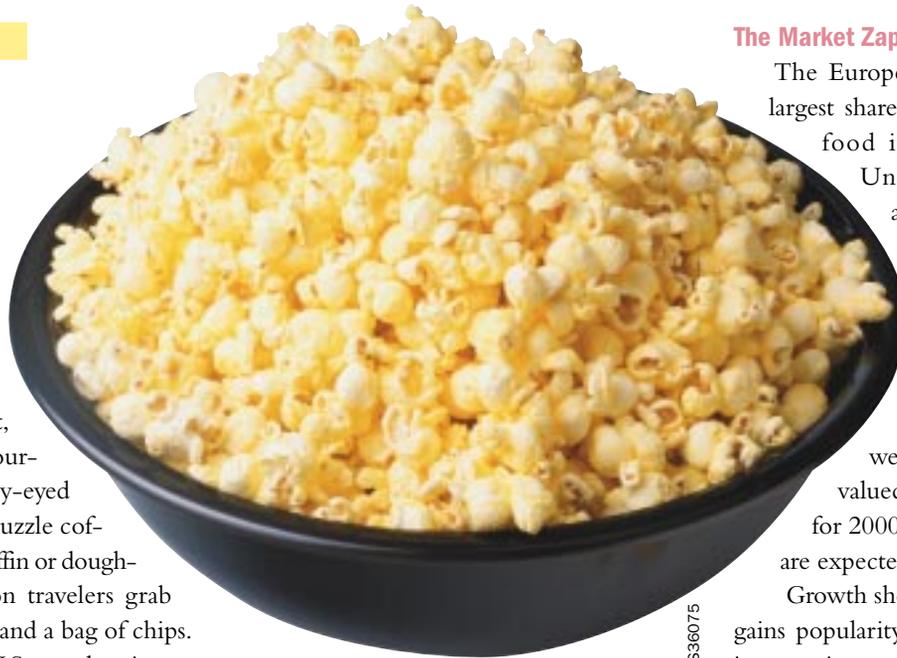
What works for U.S. travelers is now becoming an option in the Czech Republic. Modernization there should increase the export market for U.S. snack foods.

In 1992, the United States sold no candy, popcorn, chewing gum or nuts to the Czech Republic. Now these products are regularly traded and a few have caught on and are doing quite well.

Communism's end marked the birth of the perfect market conditions for convenience shopping in the Czech Republic. Wealthier and busier consumers began lining up at 24-hour supermarkets and convenience stores that are now part of the landscape in urban and rural neighborhoods. Gas station food marts, which didn't even exist prior to 1989, now fit in perfectly with the Czech consumer's busy new lifestyle.

Czechs' Mix: The Snacks They Crave

Overall, the sales of U.S. snack foods to the Czech Republic increased 67 percent in the first five months of 2000. The big sellers are candy, sales of which increased



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11 percent, and salted nuts, which went from no sales in 1999 to \$66,000 in the first five months of 2000.

Popcorn, however, was the most explosive U.S. export, with \$258,000 in sales, an 80-percent increase over the same five months of 1999. That excludes sales of microwaveable popcorn, a hot item in its own right.

Another fixture of U.S. culture, the cinema multiplex, has found a home in the Czech Republic, adding its fuel to the fire under popcorn demand. The multiplex movie theaters opening up in the Czech Republic sell a wide variety of flavored popcorn: everything from ham and pizza flavored to plain old butter.

There may even be room for more U.S. products, since potato chips and chocolate bars are among the leading snacks in the Czech Republic. The United States didn't sell any chips there in 1999 or 2000; chocolate and corn chips have been sold, but exports have been infrequent.

The Market Zap of Microwave Popcorn

The European Union may have the largest share of the Czech Republic's food import market, but the United States has jumped ahead of others in sales of microwaveable popcorn.

In fact, it was a U.S. company that first introduced the product in 1998. A year later, sales of microwaveable popcorn were about 100 metric tons, valued at \$250,000. Market data for 2000 are not yet published, but are expected to be equally as strong.

Growth should continue as the snack gains popularity. The overall year-to-year increase in popcorn consumption is estimated to be about 30 percent. And Czech imports of snack foods have grown from almost none in 1990 to \$122 million in 1999. These are numbers U.S. exporters can really sink their teeth into! ■

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SNACKEX 2001 in Prague This Year!

The Snack Food Association (SFA), the Alexandria, Va.-based association for snack food producers in the United States and worldwide, invites participation in SNACKEX 2001, the European Snacks Association's ninth annual Exhibition & Conference to be held in Prague, Czech Republic, June 24-26, 2001. The theme of the event is "East Meets West". For more information, call SFA at (703) 836-4500.