

Sur La Table is betting more on exclusive partnerships to stand out in cookware



Sur La Table's new collaboration strategy is focused on exclusives and partnering with brands and people with deep culinary expertise.

Product exclusives have been a part of 52-year-old Sur La Table's retail strategy for some time. But over the past year, the retailer has placed an increased emphasis on exclusives as it vies to differentiate itself among the fierce competition. In recent months, Sur La Table also unveiled other exclusive product collaborations with Breville and Le Creuset. Its other 2024 collaborations included a cooking class partnership with Holland America, inspired by the cruise line's ports around the world. Over the past year, Sur La Table rolled out 10 exclusive collaborations or product offerings with brands that include Staub, Shun and Scanpan.

Kristin Flor Perret, head of brand marketing at Sur La Table, joined the company in 2023. Since then, she has been heading the effort to bring its focus back to chef-driven product collaborations and cooking education through its cooking classes. "When you look at all of the products and content that's out there, you're not going to win on the endless aisle," Perret said. Perret arrived at Sur La Table at a time when buying behavior is constantly shifting within the cookware categories. "We're very fortunate to be coming off of a successful holiday season," Perret said. The collaborations leading up to the big shopping season were a big part of that success. The retailer does not break out its financial performance. However, Perret said, "We've just had our most successful peak ever, and we are beating industry standards on our performance."

But predicting sales spikes and lulls is becoming more difficult, so it's more important than ever to give customers unique offerings to shop. Sur La Table operates under the Marquee Brands umbrella, which also owns Martha Stewart's line and Motherhood Maternity, among other retail brands.

"Ever since the pandemic, we have not gotten back to predictable cycles that determine when and how people are going to shop," Perret said. Moreover, home cooking, in general, has slowed down since people first began investing in cookware and gadgets during the Covid-19 lockdowns. "Being an omnichannel retailer, we also see tremendous bifurcation in the market." Even before the pandemic, the retailer had evolved beyond its cooking school roots. When Sur La Table was founded over 50 years ago, Perret said it quickly became a destination for tools and equipment for people with bold culinary aspirations. "That was a pretty innovative thing at the time, in terms of the tailwinds that were happening around Julia Child and people really getting into cooking," she said.

But after growing to be a mass market retailer with many locations over the years, Perret said "we might have lost sight of that mission at times." Part of the idea when Perret came on board was to lean back into being a source for culinary expertise and professional-grade equipment. "We don't want to chase everyone; we [want to] really focus on understanding who our core customer is," she said.

As such, the new direction is about making sure that Sur La Table has the right tools, equipment and content that supports this positioning. Perret said that chefs often point to Sur La Table's stores as their version of a toy shop, where they can go and discover new gadgets. So part of the brand's mission is to make sure we're showing up that way consistently," Perret explained.

And having key partners and exclusives demonstrates the brand has credibility in the marketplace. When Perret joined the company, she said many cooking influencers were clamoring to collaborate on collections or private labels. "But we want to make sure the people we're bringing to the table have an authentic heritage relationship with the brand and the skills our audience expects."

"One thing that may be surprising to people is that we are the largest teacher of recreational cooking in the United States," Perret said. Last year, nearly half a million people went through Sur La Table culinary classes. That's a big part of the retailer's positioning in conversations with brands. "We have the ability to put this product into the right people's hands," Perret said. "That's the competitive advantage we have, in terms of our brick-and-mortar stores."

That's partly how the latest All-Clad collaboration came about. Perret noted that many of the conversations happening around non-stick cookware are over concerns for potential toxicity, Perret said. "People are asking whether or not it's a product that should move forward with innovation."

As Sur La Table's latest exclusive product collaborator, All-Clad said it picked the retailer to carry the new collection as part of a longstanding relationship between the two companies.

The latest collaboration with All-Clad is on its new HA1 Expert nonstick collection that rolled out in stores and online in late December. The new collection promises pan longevity through improved features like a redesigned handle for improved comfort and a full induction plate for faster heat distribution.

Jennifer Lucas-Koenig, the director of sales and marketing communications at Groupe SEB USA, All-Clad's parent company, said a big draw for the brand is the ability to reach both professional and aspiring chefs who shop at Sur La Table.

"Given our relationship with the brand, we have learned that the Sur La Table customer appreciates the highest quality nonstick cookware and expects the best," Lucas-Koenig said.

And after years of offering the All-Clad HA1 collection, Lucas-Koenig said the opportunity came to make product improvements that spoke to the Sur La Table shopper.

Lucas-Koenig pointed to two notable improvements that All-Clad made for the Sur La Table customer. The first is that the HA1 Expert has a more durable, longer lasting nonstick than the previous generation. "We also improved our handle to have a more comfortable grip, which was the top request from existing HA1 home cooks at every level," she said.

Other All-Clad partnerships involving Sur La Table are on the way, Lucas-Koenig said, like a celebrity chef collaboration with husband-and-wife chef duo, Jet and Ali Tila. "Through a unique campaign and digital class, this additional element will bring the experience of cooking with the HA1 Expert Collection to life," she said.

The Holland America collaboration is another piece of the effort to emphasize culinary education, Perret said. "Holland America came to us because their customers said in surveys that Sur La Table was a brand they wanted to see them partner with."

Sur La Table has hosted over 100 classes as part of the Holland America Line partnership. Perret said the partnership has been successful thus far, because the Sur La Table classes complement Holland America's positioning, as the cruise line makes culinary experiences a big part of its offering. "From an awareness standpoint, it has helped us reach brand-aligned audiences in a fresh way," she said. "And we look forward to seeing success as we continue to amplify this collaboration."

Perret said these collaborations fit with Sur La Table's overall focus on cooking education. "That is one of the first of that caliber of brand that we'll continue to do partnerships with."

Clay Parnell, president at The Parker Avery Group, said exclusive collaborations are a great move for a retailer trying to target a more specific customer instead of casting a wide net.

"Homeware is a tough market where they're going up against the likes of Williams Sonoma, Crate & Barrel and, of course, Amazon," Parnell said.

Similar to categories like fashion and apparel, homeware brands are constantly getting challenged with deep markdowns. So anything that retailers can do to differentiate themselves from the crowd is helpful for bringing people back. "Because you're never going to win on price," Parnell said.

Coming off of 2020 and 2021, Parnell said many people picked up the habit of cooking at home for loved ones. Retailers like Sur La Table can continue fostering relationships with this cohort through new and unique offerings, both on the product and experience sides. "There is always another tool or widget that's going to get this type of hobbyist to come back in and look around," Parnell said.

In 2025, Perret said Sur La Table will also be bringing in different types of chefs who cover a wider diaspora that's reflective of how America cooks today.

Perret said the goal is to build on the exclusive collaborations' access by bringing on one partner at a time. "It has that multiplier effect because people see the caliber of people that we brought in and also want to come on board."