

## HEALTHFUL SNACKS



### CLEAN SNACKING One of the Fastest Growing Food Trends

By Lori Zanteson

No longer frowned on, healthful snacking has become a popular way to quell hunger pangs between meals. Fueled by the growing trend of clean eating, seemingly healthful items such as 100% organic fruit and vegetable pouches, raw food snack bars made with non-GMO quinoa, and gluten-free chips made from green peas are lining supermarket shelves.

However, beyond the clean packaging and perceived health benefits, are these snacks really any different from other processed goodies in the grocery aisle?

#### What It Means to Eat Clean

Eating clean means eating whole foods in their least processed state, according to Michelle Dudash, RDN, author of *Clean Eating for Busy Families*. A clean diet includes lots of fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds, and humanely treated lean proteins, she says, but it doesn't rule out entire food groups.

"When you eat clean, you get more fiber, which is associated with so many good things," Dudash explains. Clean foods also offer more antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and good fats.

Just as important is what clean foods don't have, such as excess sodium, because they're less processed and contain no trans fats, only those that naturally occur in meats and dairy products. They also contain less added sugar, such as in the form of honey and agave, less total sugar, and no artificial food colorings, which have been associated with attention-deficit disorder in children, Dudash says.

The increase in healthful snack foods "really ramped up in 2013, and the category continues to grow," says Melissa Herrmann Dierks, RDN, LDN, CDE, a contributor and advisory board member for Supermarket Savvy, a nutrition education business that helps make healthful grocery shopping easier. Many of these snack foods have been what Dierks describes as "health washed" to look like healthful foods. "These 'healthy' snack foods list a variety of front-of-label claims, such as non-GMO, gluten free, and whole grain, and feature ingredients such as olive oil and flax," she says.

Many of the well-known manufacturers who make these products also use packaging that's less glossy, designed to look healthier when they may not be at all, Dierks says, and it seems to be working.

#### Clean Curb Appeal

"Consumers seem to be drawn to products that have health claims, whether or not they are scientifically proven," says Carrie Nielsen, MS, RD, LMNT, a Linden Market Hy-Vee dietitian in Omaha, Nebraska. A recent remodel doubled the size of her supermarket's healthful foods section, allowing more space to introduce the constant flow of new products, among which are KIND bars, LARABARS, Bear Naked granola, SkinnyPop popcorn, and Go Raw Super Cookies. "The consumers I work with tend to feel better about their food choices when they seek out foods with these qualities. There are definitely consumers who seek out products like this and are more than willing to pay a higher price and try something new," Nielsen says.

Cleaner packaging and front-of-package claims clearly have some sway with consumers, but these claims can be confusing. Labeling popcorn as a non-GMO food may give consumers the impression that it's a healthier option than popcorn without this label, when the reality is that all popcorn grown in the United States is non-GMO, Dierks says. This same popcorn also can be labeled gluten free. Aside from gluten-containing flavorings, popcorn is naturally gluten free. "So a product can be loaded with fat and sodium, but a consumer will think it's a healthful option from looking at front-of-label claims such as non-GMO or gluten free," she explains.

A Nutrition Facts panel comparison of these healthful snacks with other processed foods is the only way to determine differences in important ingredients, such as fat, sodium, preservatives, and additives. According to Dierks, there isn't a significant difference between them, besides a few that may be a little lower in fat than their traditional counterpart. "During my Supermarket Savvy supermarket tours, I teach clients to look at the Nutrition Facts panel on the back of the food label to best assess fat, sodium, and nutrient content, and compare those numbers to their daily goals," she says.

#### Behind the Label

However, there's more to healthful snacks than even the label reveals. Developing healthful snacks is a complex undertaking, according to Roger Clemens, DrPH, chief scientific officer for The E.T. Horn Company and an adjunct professor of pharmacology and pharmaceutical sciences in the University of Southern California School of Pharmacy. "We're at a significant junction to create snack foods that are good for you, satisfying, economical, and lower calorie. Food is for enjoyment as well as for nutrition," he says.

But it can be difficult to meet people's expectations. "What really rules is healthiness is in the eyes of the beholder," he says. "Consumers don't trust the scientists; they trust the food bloggers."

He adds that much of the perception people have about the healthfulness of foods is tied to what they read and hear about today's buzzwords and hot topics, such as organic, gluten free, and non-GMO, which have become front-of-package health claims.

Moreover, there's a broad base of consumers who represent different cultures and expectations. Americans, for example, like their food to taste sweeter than Europeans do, Clemens continues. People also want their food to look a certain way. Nobody wants a brown apple, so scientists need to add the ascorbic acid, proper packaging, and cold storage to prevent this.

Food scientists try to tap into what people like to eat and want to eat but still keep items safe, nutritious, affordable, shelf stable, and accessible; they work to bring creativity and innovation to healthful snack foods. Sensory properties such as taste, texture, and mouthfeel are all part of that equation. "Great work is being done [in food science]," Clemens says.

### New on the Clean Snack Scene

Hundreds of examples of healthful snacks were on display at this year's Natural Products Expo West in Anaheim, California. Clean snacks in particular, which are among the fastest growing snack categories, were widely represented. The following are some of the hottest trends:

#### Whole Foods Bars

Made with easily recognized whole-foods ingredients, these snacks come in flavors to suit a variety of tastes. Organic dates, apricots, almonds, cashews, quinoa, and Himalayan salt are a sampling of ingredients contained in Thunderbird Energetica bars, which include flavors such as Cacao Hemp Walnut and Cashew Fig Carrot. These bars carry multiple front-of-package labeling claims, including soy free, gluten free, raw, vegan, and non-GMO.

Fruit and nut bars, such as Pure Organic Ancient Grains bars also were showcased at the Expo. These bars add whole grain quinoa, amaranth, flax, and hemp to its Chocolate Chunk Nut, Peanut Butter Chocolate, and Triple Berry Nut varieties. The Fruit & No-Nut Bars from The Good Bean are made with chickpeas instead of nuts and are available in Chocolate Berry, Fruit & Seeds Trail Mix, and Apricot Coconut.

#### Fruit and Vegetable Pouches

These convenient grab-and-go snacks have moved beyond the playground and into the adult world. While companies, such as Happy Family Organic Superfoods, with its Happy

Popular Clean Snacks	Whole Food Ingredients
Bara Coconut Simply Toasted Chips	Coconut
Beanitos White Cheddar Puffs	Whole navy beans, cheddar cheese
Go Raw Original Super Cookies	Organic coconut, sprouted organic sesame seeds, organic dates
Go Raw Spirulina Super Chips	Sprouted organic sesame seeds, organic bananas, organic coconut, organic dates, organic spirulina
Happy Squeeze Twist Blueberry, Apple & Purple Carrot	Organic apples, organic blueberries, organic chia seeds
KIND Nut Delight bar	Peanuts, almonds, walnuts, Brazil nuts, honey, flaxseeds
Peter Rabbit Organics Kale, Broccoli, and Mango veggie blend	Organic kale, organic broccoli, organic mango
Pure Organic Ancient Grains Triple Berry Nut Bar	Quinoa, crispy brown rice, amaranth, flaxseeds, hemp seeds, almonds, walnuts, peanuts, cashew butter, blueberries, apples, cranberries, raspberries
The Real Deal Real! Veggie Chips	Green peas
Thunderbird Energetica Cashew Fig Carrot bar	Organic dates, organic cashews, organic figs, carrots

Squeeze and Peter Rabbit Organics 100% fruit and veggie purée pouches, still market to babies and toddlers, they've gained a following from parents who are just as fond of flavors such as Kale, Broccoli and Mango, and Pumpkin, Carrot and Apple.

#### Fresh Takes on Chips

Chips also were well represented at this year's expo. Made with everything from traditional potato and corn to the more novel parsnips, peas, and beans, attendees could sample a different chip in every aisle. Real! Veggie Chips made with green peas have 80% less fat than potato chips, offer 1½ servings of vegetables per ounce, and are both vegan and gluten free. Beanitos Puffs are a cheese puff alternative made with navy beans. Higher in fiber and protein and lower in fat and sodium than traditional snack puffs, Beanitos also are gluten free and non-GMO.

Coconut chips are just as popular. Several companies, including Dang Foods, Bare Foods Co, and Go Raw, have toasted and raw varieties in flavors such as Caramel Sea Salt and Chocolate Bliss. Pumpkin Super Chips and Spirulina Super Chips are two offerings from Go Raw. These chips are made with sprouted seeds and dried at a low temperature to release enzymes that the company says makes them healthier.

#### Options Aplenty

When it comes to clean eating, fruits and vegetables are about as clean as it gets. Yet there's no denying the convenience, novelty, and fun factor of healthful packaged snacks. While the produce aisle may offer the best choices, the healthful snack section has several options, many of which are made with whole-foods ingredients.

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