

New snacks bring plant-based trend to the center of the store

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A desire to eat more fruits, vegetables and other [plant-based](#) foods has been driving US consumers to shop the perimeter of the store in search of fresh options, but a growing category of packaged snacks is bringing the trend to the center aisles. Food brands are introducing new packaged crackers, chips and other [snacks](#) with a focus on nutrition and helping shoppers increase their plant intake.

Shoppers want plants -- and options

Consumers' efforts to eat more vegetables are driven by several factors, including the superior sustainability of plant-based foods over animal proteins and the health benefits of a plant-forward diet. Forty-six percent of shoppers said they have increased vegetables in their diet to improve their health, wellness or manage their weight, according to a 2014 study by The Hartman Group. Increasing whole grain consumption is also a priority for health-conscious shoppers, and 62% of consumers said they are adding/increasing whole grains in their diet.

Despite these increases, most US consumers aren't meeting the recommended intake guidelines for fruits and vegetables. Lack of availability, inconvenience and perceived taste are some of the roadblocks consumers said are keeping them from eating more plant-based foods, according to the Hartman Group. Food brands are responding with packaged snacks that are readily available and deliver on both nutrition and taste. While the former may drive consumers to seek out these alternative snacks, the latter is essential to ensuring repeat purchases.

More than half of adults agreed the main reason they choose to eat salty snacks or crackers with specialty ingredient formulations is because they like the flavor and/or texture variety, according to Packaged Facts' December 2016 National Consumer Survey.

Pulses are popular, but vegetables and grains lead the pack

Alternative vegetable snacks are the most popular of the alternative-ingredient snacks, generating 45% of the dollar sales in the category, according to Packaged Facts. This subcategory includes veggie chips such as [Terra Chips](#) or dried vegetable crisps such as [Harvest Snaps](#). Grain-based snacks, such as multigrain chips from [Food Should Taste Good](#) and Mondelez International's [GOOD THiNS](#) crackers, trail slightly behind, accounting for 40% of the salty snacks segment.

Pulse-based snacks account for just 15% of alternative-ingredient salty snack sales, although the sub-category has high visibility due to its meteoric rise. Chickpea-based pulse snacks saw growth of more than 150% in the year ending Oct. 30, 2016, which the United Nations declared the [International Year of Pulses](#). Brands including [The Good Bean](#), [Hippeas](#) and [Biena Snacks](#) have filled shelves with chickpea snacks in a variety of flavors.

What's next for plant-based snacks?

Sales of snacks using pulses and alternative vegetables and grains grew 5.2% between 2015 and 2016, according to Packaged Facts, and growth is likely to continue. In a report released January 2017, Packaged Facts forecast a compound annual growth rate for the segment of 6.2% between 2017 and 2019.

"Alternative ingredient snack sales are going to continue moderate to strong growth over the next few years, building on the larger healthier-for-you trend affecting the overall snack market and providing the unique flavors and textures consumers are also craving," report author Norman Deschamps wrote in "Snack Food Nutrition Trends: Pulses, Vegetables, and Grains in Salty Snacks & Crackers."

In its [2018 trends forecast](#), Whole Foods Market predicted that puffed and popped snacks will be a major trend in the coming year. The retailer credited new extrusion methods for bringing items such as popped cassava chips and seaweed fava chips to market. The Specialty Food Association's Trendspotter Panel included plant-based foods in its prediction of the [top 10 trends for 2018](#). Panel member and Midnight Market founder Alysis Vasquez specifically mentioned the rise of plant-based convenience foods as consumers look for new on-the-go snack options, noting that packaging will be an important factor to consider during product development.

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