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Prime Time



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By Natalie Hammer Noblitt

Snack time is meal time



Breakfast, lunch and dinner used to map how Americans ate — and in turn defined snacks as the food consumed between meals. Faster-paced lifestyles make mini-meals increasingly common, even though shoppers still idealize the concept of three squares a day, researchers say. These smaller eating occasions and snacks occupy a large place in daily eating habits, although what consumers choose to snack on is always changing.

"Modern eating culture" is defined by very few rules, according to consumer researchers at The Hartman Group. Availability, cravings, acting on a whim, following aspirations and ethical priorities all play a part in how Americans eat, they say.

Consumers now eat more snacks, at different times of day, than in the past, says Peggy Kochenbach, a registered dietitian nutritionist who works as a consultant for companies in the natural and organic food industries. "We've long known that eating healthful snacks are an ideal way of getting your body the energy you need," Kochenbach says, "But we're now taking it to an even greater level. Snacking in the morning is almost as popular as afternoon snacking."

Keeping shoppers interested with exciting flavors and unique products may be key to getting them to

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keeping shoppers interested with exciting flavors and unique processes may be key to getting them to shop at specialty retailers for snacks.

"I find that most of our guests like to find those 'treats' that they cannot find in any other local shop besides ours," says Kate O'Hara, manager for Brother's Provisions in San Diego. "That is what really sets us above and apart. They want that something special to share with coworkers or friends ... or maybe just keep for themselves. Our guests are always willing to try something new."

From Clever to Classic

Just as shoppers think of bacon and eggs as breakfast items, some foods just fit the traditional way Americans snack. Pretzels, chips, popcorn and other portable items consistently sell — with many getting flavor and ingredient upgrades from today's specialty food manufacturers.

Quinn Snacks of Boulder, Colo., recently launched Pretzels Reimagined, which are gluten-free pretzels made with whole grain and ancient grains, offering a snack that is free of corn, soy, dairy and GMOs. The company touts "farm-to-bag" transparency to let consumers see where every ingredient comes from. The pretzels come in two varieties, Touch of Honey and Classic Sea Salt.

"Snacks are one of the most processed categories in the grocery store," says Kristy Lewis, founder and CEO of Quinn Snacks. "I wanted to show that there is another way. Over time, we hope that our work on transparency will encourage other snack companies to do the same. When you share where every ingredient comes from, you make food differently, you make it better."

The company already offers a line of Popcorn Reimagined, which expanded to include White Cheddar and Classic Sea Salt varieties. Quinn Snacks says the White Cheddar introduction is the only microwave popcorn on the market to use real cheddar cheese. Other unique features of the popcorn include that the bags don't use metal or plastic to help the kernels pop like typical versions and the corn is organic and Non-GMO Project Verified.

While Quinn Snacks provides products in shareable portions, packaging — and the ability for a snack to travel with ease — often factor in to consumers' purchasing habits.

"Snacks are often eaten on-the-go and ease and convenience are a must," says dietitian nutritionist Kochenbach. "New options in the category, as well as new packaging options for whole foods like nuts, seeds and even yogurt are giving consumers lots of options for healthful snacking."

Eating on-the-go can even mean eating in a hurry at home. Consumers often eat alone and will grab quick, already-portioned snacks to take home, according to research from Hartman Group. "Although they still use terms like snacks, treats and energy boosts, what consumers are often describing are mini-meals, and many people eat those types of meals throughout the day instead of traditional meals," states "Modern Eating," a 2014 report by Hartman Group.

And healthful options also come in the form of using new ingredients to create classic snacks. Take chips, an easy-to-munch favorite that doesn't always have healthful attributes on its side as a snack option. Beanitos of Austin, Texas, changes that by using nutrient-packed beans and turning them into crispy chips that satisfy a desire for something with crunch.

"We're answering a growing demand for healthy snacks with our bean-based chips that not only taste great but are also good for you," says Alicia Ward, Beanitos vice president of marketing. "When shopping for snacks, people are looking at the ingredient list. Can they recognize the ingredients they are putting into their bodies? We're proud to say that Beanitos always lists beans as the first of only real, natural ingredients."

Beanitos recently introduced Skinny Dippers, a baked chip that has only 90 calories and 2 grams of fat per serving. Each bag contains a mix of black and white bean chips — delivering a quarter cup of beans in every serving — that are gluten-free, vegan, certified Kosher and non-GMO. New flavors in the original line of White Bean Chips include White Bean Crunch Mac n' Cheese, White Bean Garden Fresh Salsa, and White Bean Sweet Chili & Sour Cream.

Vegging Out

Vegetarian products like Beanitos are now a big category in snacking, and it's a trend experts in the gourmet and natural food industry say will continue to see steady growth.

"Increasing numbers of shoppers are looking for plant-based protein options both in meals and in their snacks," says Kochenbach. "Ancient grains, seeds, nuts and legumes are all the rage. Nut-based bars, snacks made with ancient grains baked in and flavored chickpea snacks are gaining popularity."

Plants from the sea are also coming on strong in the snack market with the popularity of seaweed-based snacks. Mintel reveals that food and drink product launches with seaweed flavors, including kombu, nori/laver and wakame seaweed flavors, in North America increased by 76 percent between 2011 and 2015.

San Francisco Bay-area seaweed snack maker Ocean's Halo says the U.S. has seen a surge in launches of snack products with seaweed during the past two years. Because seaweed is a low-calorie



Beanitos Skinny Dippers is among the growing number of healthy snacks.

source of protein and fiber, richer in trace minerals and vitamins than kale, and ticks a number of free-from boxes, it is winning wider attention, says Robert Mock, CEO and co-founder of Ocean's Halo.



Ocean's Halo is among the growing number of snacks made with seaweed.

Ocean's Halo has a line of sheeted seaweed snacks that recently expanded with a new Maui Onion flavor and an entirely new product — Almond Seaweed Strips — that features crunchy almonds in between two lightly sweetened seaweed strips. The seaweed snacks are USDA-certified organic, Non-GMO Project Verified, vegan certified, and they use only gluten-free ingredients.

All these certifications are being listed because consumers really are reading labels when it comes to choosing snacks, says Sean Kelly, SnackNation CEO and co-founder. His Los Angeles-based company delivers snack food to offices of all sizes all over the country, with a focus on gourmet and natural products.

"Consumers are hyper-focused on ingredients. They not only want to know nutrition facts but also want to know the story behind the product — are ingredients locally sourced, is the product sustainable and GMO-free?" says Kelly. "They even want to know who invented the product and why. This is especially true for the millennial generation, and it is quite a change

compared to behaviors only five to 10 years ago."

The Sweeter Side

Cravings for something sweet can happen any time of day, so it's no surprise that shoppers still enjoy sweet treats among the many small meals they may eat in a day.

Sales in the candy business remain sweet, says the National Confectioners Association (NCA), the trade organization representing the \$35 billion U.S. confections industry. The NCA will host the Sweets & Snacks Expo in Chicago May 24-26. This year the show will grow by 20 percent, and the NCA thanks several trends in the confection industry for helping keep consumer interest.

Photo courtesy of Setton Farms



Premium chocolate-covered nuts and fruits are gaining in popularity because of their better-for-you and indulgent appeal.

A study of sales from November 2014 to November 2015 by the NCA showed gourmet and premium chocolate, especially dark chocolate, remains popular. The NCA findings also show that fun introductions of bold flavored confections, which are especially popular with millennials, are driving sales.

"Millennials are living a fast-paced life. They work hard, play hard, and work out just as hard. They see indulgences as a reward for all their hard work," says SnackNation's Kelly. "Millennials are more willing to indulge when the product is artisan or handcrafted, or if they connect to the story behind the food. They prioritize experiences, and so want to experience sweets, treats, or other indulgences that have a compelling history or mystique behind them."

Producers with a history, and who continue to make the products in small batches using traditional methods, appeal to consumers who want authenticity and nostalgia. Family-owned Annie B's Caramels and Popcorn, Kellogg, Minn., makes wrapped caramels using local ingredients by slow cooking in copper pots. Each piece is made by hand with the exception of cutting and wrapping. "They are handcrafted candies the way it used to be made in eras bygone," says Amanda Henke, owner of Annie B's. Henke recognizes that consumers are looking for clean, natural and organic products and for unique flavor profiles.

Fruits and nuts included in chocolate do have a better-for-you appeal with consumers, says the NCA. According to its survey last year of 1,400 shoppers, 41 percent purchased chocolate with fruits and nuts as a healthier option to traditional sweets.

Specialty producers like Fannie May Candies have taken notice and continue to expand offerings that incorporate chocolate, fruits and nuts. David Taiclet, president of 1-800-Flowers.com Inc. Gourmet

Food Group, which owns Fannie May, says he sees the fruit, nuts and chocolate combinations as a growing trend. Fannie May recently launched a line featuring enrobed fruits — blueberries dipped in milk chocolate and a blueberry coating and Bing cherries dipped in milk chocolate and then dipped in cherry coating with bits of real cherries. A new Bark Bar line also includes lots of dried fruits and nuts with a variety of chocolate styles.

Owned by the same parent company, Harry & David offers a wide selection of seasonal fruit doubled panned in chocolate with options that include chocolate-covered dried strawberries, milk chocolate-covered bananas, dark chocolate-covered coconut and dark chocolate-covered pineapple.

"Consumers are now looking for options that balance between healthy and indulgent, looking for items that check both boxes," says Taiclet. "For example, barks have recently emerged as a 'feel-good' chocolate indulgence because they can be packed with healthy extras like fruits and seeds that boost antioxidants and mineral levels."

Stoneridge Orchards of Royal City, Wash., is a smaller producer that has been able to take its strong presence in dried fruit production and turn it into treats that have sweet and savory elements. Their chocolate-covered fruit collection just expanded to include Strawberries Dipped in 70% Dark Chocolate. Greek Yogurt Dipped fruits are also new sweet offerings and include dipped cherries, blueberries and cranberries. A more savory introduction is Chili Lime Cherries with Tajin, which takes dried cherries and flavors them with Tajin, a top-selling spice blend in both the U.S. and Mexico that contains premium chilies, lime juice, and sea salt.

Retailers can now cater to almost any consumer craving in the sweets and snacks category with so many flavors and styles of snacks available. Because consumers are reading labels, it will be important for retailers to make purchases based on ingredients to keep shoppers interested and loyal, says dietician Kochenbach. She says she's happy to see so many producers moving toward healthier, cleaner ingredients. "I'm seeing a lot of new products that are based on those whole-food items ... that use nuts, seeds and fruits as a foundation. Consumers also want snacks without excess sodium, trans fats, artificial colors or flavors and other additives." They're unlike snack bars and nutrition bars or the granola bars of the past, which sometimes contained more sugar and fat than anything else, she adds.

New Products

Protein-Enriched Cookies

Alwhays Good protein-enriched gourmet cookies are made with cold-pressed whey protein and contain 8-10 grams of protein per cookie. They are available in three flavors: Vanilla Chocolate Chip, Peanut Butter Chocolate Chip and Chocolate Black & White. They are non-GMO and contain no trans fat. Each 4-ounce package contains two cookies. SRP: \$24.99 for a caddy of 12 packages, with two cookies per package.

Alwhays Good, Colts Neck, N.J. www.alwhaysgood.com, 732-428-6659



Portioned Cheese Spreads

Alouette's new Le Petite Fromage is a line of spreads portioned for smart snacking, made of natural ingredients without preservatives. A blend of indulgent cheese, yogurt, fresh vegetables and spices creates big flavor. Each package contains eight portions, and each serving is 40 calories. Available in Garlic & Herb, Garden Salsa, Cucumber & Dill and Parmesan & Basil. SRP: \$3.99.

Alouette Cheese USA, Holland, Pa., 800-322-2743, www.alouettecheese.com



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