

Concentrated Goodness

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Health trends and diet fads come and go, but regardless of what's in vogue, everybody seems to agree that dried fruits and nuts are quintessentially good for you.

The USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion in its dietary guidelines for Americans includes nuts, seeds and fruits in its daily requirements. As excellent sources of essential fatty acids, good sources of vitamin E as well as other essential nutrients, nuts and seeds should be eaten frequently as a leaner alternative to meat and poultry, recommends the USDA. And eating a diet rich in fruit protects against strokes, certain types of cancer, cardiovascular diseases, reduces the risk of Type 2 diabetes, adds fiber to the diet along with vitamin C, potassium and folates, while providing a great low calorie, low-sodium, cholesterol-free food choice.

What's more, notes the USDA, half a serving of dried fruit is equivalent to a whole serving of regular fruit; and half

an ounce of nuts or seeds can be considered equal to a one ounce serving of meat or beans.

The message is clear, and with healthy eating on the rise, people do appear to be turning more and more to dried fruits, nuts and seeds as dietary staples and healthy snacking options.

"Just look around, diabetes is a big deal. People are fat!" says Ian Kelleher of Peeled Snacks, a company founded with his wife Noha Wai-
bsnaider.

"Healthcare costs are on the rise and the press is making a big stink. The public is finally shying away from products with indecipherable ingredients" and seeking out simple healthier fare for their daily nibbles, said Kelleher. Case in point: his company's 100 percent natural dried fruit and nut snacks.

Since its first product launch in 2005, Peeled Snacks has experienced a doubling of sales every year according to Kelleher, and this year it's seeing an even greater boost due in part to the launch of its four new certified organic snack treats: pine-4-Pineapple, go-Mango-man-go, Banan-a-peel and Cashew later.

"We are dealing with a trend in fruit, which I hope will hold out," says Kelleher. "Is it a trend or is a movement? I'm not quite sure. But one way or another it's good fruit."

Recent figures published by Chicago-based market research firm Information Resources, Inc., show a 5.3 percent rise in sales of dried fruit from June 2007 to June 2008 on the previous year; a \$645 million business at present. The report cites sales of around \$1.8 billion in the nuts category, up by 4.5 percent on the previous year. Perhaps more significantly, it cites a 20 percent increase in sales of miscellaneous snacks (around \$302 million in sales), a category that includes apple chips, nutritional snacks and trail mixes—areas where product innovation is ripe.

"People are getting the message that fruit and nuts are good for you," says Angela Liu, president of Crispy Green, a four-year old company that produces all-natural freeze-dried apple, apricot, peach, pear and pineapple chips. Freeze-drying fruits is a relatively new technique that's been getting a lot of interest in the press and in the marketplace — "Someone called freeze drying 'the new black,'" jokes Liu — but it's a relatively small market in the overall fruit category, she notes, "mainly because they are more expensive [to produce] and not all freeze-dried fruits (without additives) taste that good."

Crispy Green's products are produced without any additives, sweeteners or preservatives, but at present there are no plans to produce and market an organic product.

"I see the trends for natural snacks such as dried fruit, seeds and nuts continue to grow at a healthy rate despite the adverse economic conditions," says Liu, "but the growth of the organic segment will see



some slow down or may even be down shifted because of spending pressures. The desire of cost saving will outweigh the benefits of eating 'organic,' which has been hard to prove scientifically."

Though committed to producing organic snack products for 15 years, Newman's Own Organics co-founder Peter Meehan is faced with exactly the kinds of challenges to which Liu refers, as costs of ingredients skyrocket which results in unavoidable price rises in his company's products. "When I get together with other organic food producers, the first thing we talk about is the cost and supply lines for ingredients," says Meehan. "The growers have to wait three years to bring land in, and in the meantime the price of conventional commodities goes up and the premium goes up. Supplies have been so incredibly tight. We hope they'll drop off some, but it's a little early for anybody to tell."

Nevertheless, Meehan notes that the success of Newman's Own Organics, which includes a line of six organic dried fruits as well as its ever-popular organic Fig Newmans cookie line, has rested largely on rising to the challenge. The company was the first to make microwave popcorn without partially hydrogenated shortening, now commonplace, and the first to perfect a method of cooking and packaging dried prunes in a single step that retains the product's softness and prolongs its shelf-life without the use of preservative potassium sorbate.

"It's interesting how having rules in place to say what you can't use makes you have to think another way," says Meehan. As a result, he says, "our dried fruit program keeps moving forward!" Raisins are the company's number one-selling dried fruit product, with cranberries next up in the popularity stakes.

While brands such as Newman's Own Organics can be seen to represent the establishment in the natural and organic dried fruits sector, a host of up-and-comers with new innovations are hopping on the apple cart—or cactus cart in the case of Southern California's Cactus Jerky. An all-natural product, Cactus Jerky is organic prickly pear cactus snacks that come in organic teriyaki and hot and spicy flavors. "Vegans and vegetarians love it," says company founder Jeff Leibfreid. "It looks like a meat jerky,

and some people taste it and ask what animal it is, but it's a vegan product. We try to make it as close as possible to the real thing."

And newly popular too are fortified foods, which thanks to Snacktrition (a new division of Mel-lace Family Brands, which produces all-natural nut snacks and fruit and nut

mixes) have also entered the dried fruit and nuts sector. Snacktrition's almonds, cashews and fruit and nut mix are fortified with calcium and/or fiber, nutrients significantly lacking in the American diet, according to Snacktrition's vice president of marketing Tony Bogato.

The first company to produce fortified nuts, Snacktrition has benefited from being in the right place at the right time with the right products, says Bogato. "I certainly think that the consumer is getting more aware of the health benefits of natural products and is learning about the right foods and nutrients to eat," he says. The company's all natural fiber and calcium fortified fruit and nut mix is our number one seller right now, says Bogato. "Trail mixes seem to be very hot right now, and with the antioxidants the blueberries have, on top of the calcium and fiber, it's made the product very successful." **nfn**

