Natural Foods, Paleo Diet Go Mainstream

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What do misshapen produce, plant-based dyes and the paleo diet have in common? They're all aspects of a sweeping American trend to favor natural foods. After decades of escalating biological and technological intervention in how our food is grown, processed, packaged and sold, a significant group of shoppers yearns to take eating back to a simpler time.

Taking it back further than most are proponents of the trendy Paleolithic or "paleo" diet, which recommends eating and 'exercising' as our cave-dwelling, hunter-gather ancestors did. Advocates postulate that today's industrialized agriculture and the sedentary lifestyle it spawns are to blame for epidemics of obesity and related diseases. Thus fruit, vegetables, nuts and meat are in, while grains, dairy, refined sugar and legumes are out. The whole idea may sound way out there, but Amazon

offers more than 2,500 titles devoted to the diet–250 released since the start of this spring alone—and a Google search yields 29 million results.

Of course, proponents of the paleo diet are just one subgroup of the natural foods movement, though there are many more advocates who also want to turn back the clock–just not by epochs. Decades-old practices such as heirloom vegetable gardening, home canning and pickling and buying fresh and local foods [1] from the farmer's market are also important elements of today's natural foods lifestyle.

Organic Is a Subset of Natural

Equally important is the definition of 'natural' and its distinction from 'organic.' While natural foods don't have a USDA definition and certification the way organic foods do, they're generally understood to be less processed, free of synthesized chemicals and as close to their natural states as possible. Organic is a subset of the broader umbrella of natural foods.

In a recent column, I offered suggestions to food and beverage manufacturers who want to appeal to this growing consumer group. In recent weeks, two powerful, national retail chains have also moved to embrace these shoppers. Target announced in April its "Made to Matter" [2] collection, a 120-SKU collection of natural, organic and sustainable products, Forbes reported. Also in April, Wal-Mart announced a partnership with Wild Oats to offer a line of organic foods at prices equivalent to conventional products, which the company describes as an effort to disrupt the growing organic food market [3], notes The Wall Street Journal's MarketWatch blog.

Imperfection Is OK In Natural Foods

In addition, many of today's well educated, natural foods shoppers are willing to forgo cosmetic perfection in the produce aisle to obtain more natural and flavorful foods. That's because, as it turns out, those flawless looks come at a price. Researchers recently learned the uniform shape and deep red color so many modern tomato varieties have been bred for are only possible at the expense of flavor [4].

Buying cosmetically imperfect food also appeals to the sustainable sensibility of natural foods proponents, many of whom know that unrealistic 'beauty standards' for food are a significant reason why some 40 percent of all food produced in the U.S. goes uneaten [5], as noted in "The Price of Perfection," a report from the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

Not surprisingly, natural foodies are equally picky about the processed foods they do buy, reading labels fastidiously and eschewing anything unpronounceable, including

artificial colors and synthesized chemical preservatives. They will opt for dried apricots that are more dirt brown than brilliant orange if it means they don't have to eat the sulphites used to maintain the color.

Companies Respond To Consumers' Concerns

In fact, natural foods advocates' concerns about artificial colors and their potential link to children's hyperactivity [6], as reported by The Washington Post, have led some U.S. companies to phase artificial colorants out and instead incorporate natural plant-based dyes. Kraft, for example, recently removed two yellow dyes [7] from three pasta products aimed at kids and replaced them with natural beta-carotene and paprika in the

wake of a 350,000-signature petition started by mommy bloggers, also noted in The Washington Post.

In the beverage category, consumers' concerns about health and nutrition have accelerated a decline in soda consumption [8] that started slowly about a decade ago, as ABC News reported this month. Soda sales dropped 3 percent in 2013, bringing volume to its lowest level since 1985. Consumers are instead drinking water, coconut water, lower-sugar natural juice and juice blends, while getting their caffeine hit with energy drinks, premium coffees and ready-to-drink teas. As I outlined in a recent column, these super-premium tea consumers gravitate toward low to no-sugar beverages with short and clean labels [9].

Packaging Matters to Natural Food Enthusiasts Too

In addition to monitoring food's sourcing and ingredients, it's worth noting that natural foods proponents also care very much about packaging, preferring formats that protect and naturally preserve the products they buy—and do so in an environmentally responsible way. That's why cartons continue to proliferate in the natural foods space, as evidenced at March 2014 Natural Products Expo West in Anaheim, California.

Made principally from sustainably sourced paperboard, cartons are recyclable and are lightweight and compact, characteristics that foster low carbon emissions and less waste throughout their lifecycle. What's more, the aseptic processing used to fill cartons makes it possible to protect foods for up to a year without preservatives. It is also a superior method for protecting the vitamins and other ingredients'

quality natural food proponents care deeply about.

According to Vita Coco Senior Vice President for Marketing Jeff Rubenstein: “When consumers first learn that Tetra Pak cartons are made from paper from sustainably managed forests, I think that provides a certain halo benefit for our brand.”

Natural foods powerhouse Pacific Foods credits the carton with its products’ success in the area of sustainability–and freshness.

“We want to source only the highest-quality ingredients, and the Tetra Pak package really helps us to do that,” says Brand Manager Ben Hummel. “It maintains the quality of those ingredients, of the minerals and the vitamins and locks in that fresh flavor the way no other package can.”

The natural foods products category is projected to grow to $226 billion by 2018 at a rate of 8.6 percent per year [10], according to the organizers of Natural Products Expo West, the nation’s largest conference devoted to this category. This is clearly more of a movement than a passing fad, and food manufacturers must continue to work hard to appeal to its proponents. In doing so, they should take care to consider all aspects of their supply chain, from the fresh and natural ingredients they select and the processing technologies they use to produce and protect their products to the packaging. All will impact what consumers will choose to take home.

Suley Muratoglu, vice president, Marketing & Product Management, Tetra Pak Inc. U.S & Canada, currently runs the company’s presence in core categories, including dairy, beverage and food. Further industry insights from him can be found at www.doingwhatsgood.us [11]. Tetra Pak (tetrapakusa.com) is the world's leading food processing and packaging solutions company.

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