

Protein Retakes the Center Aisle

By J.K. Rose

For years, we've been told to avoid a grocery store's center aisles if we want to eat healthy. That's where the bad stuff lurks — so the claim goes — the candy, chips and sodas in all their sugary, carb-y and fatty renditions. But platitudes are by definition stale, and shoppers should take this one with a large grain of salt.

While it is true that the fresh produce and meat departments are traditionally located on the supermarket's periphery, the same is true with bakeries — those bastions of neon-frosted cakes and oil-saturated muffins. But modern supermarkets are shaking up this model; at Sprout's, for example, seasonal fruits and vegetables dominate the center section.

“The notion of shopping in just one section of a store is a pet peeve of mine,” says Bonnie Taub-Dix, a registered diet nutritionist and creator of BetterThanDieting.com. “It's time to listen to reason rather than hype. I like to say ‘make the most of the middle.’”

According to Nielsen analytics, 55% of American households say that items with “high protein” are important when they draw up their shopping lists. The FDA recommends that adult women consume 46 grams of protein a day and men consume 56 grams. Athletes, pregnant women and nursing mothers needs even more — 71 daily grams, according to the agency. Food purveyors have responded by doubling the number of packaged products advertising “high protein content” on their labels between 2013 and 2017, according to Innova Market Insights. Now the center aisles are brimming with products touting high protein, from “protein cereal” to “protein plus” farfalle.

“From novel and exotic animal protein products to plant-based dairy alternatives and energy bars made with seeds and legumes, we've seen a steady rise in food and beverages formulated with and marketed to emphasis protein content,” says Daniel Granderson, an analyst for Packaged Facts, a market research firm.

According to a recent Packaged Facts poll, consumers prize food that is affordable, convenient, and easy to prepare — all adjectives that describe the center aisles' offerings. That's where the protein heavyweights reside — the canned chilis, soups and stews on the shelves, the frozen meatballs in the freezers and the sliced meats in the deli cases.

Advances in technology have allowed food purveyors to offer better-quality, better-tasting meat. For years, processors relied on chemicals to kill pathogens in deli meats, for example. After health concerns about foods preserved with nitrates were raised, companies switched, in the mid-2000s, to using sodium diacetate and potassium lactate. Recently, an even healthier, natural, preservation method called “high-pressure pasteurization” enables producers to sterilize meat using nothing more than water pressure. Here's how it works: sealed deli products are placed in a pressure chamber, where up to 87,000 pounds of water pressure—roughly equal to five to six times the pressure found at the bottom of the deepest ocean—are exerted per square inch, sealing in freshness and sealing out harmful bacteria. The result is a fresher, natural flavor with no chemicals — either in your food, or lingering on your tongue. The cutting-edge technology has the added benefit of doubling a meat products shelf life.

Likewise, eating nutritious food from a can used to be considered an oxymoron, but not anymore, says Barbara Ruhs, a former Harvard nutritionist who now works as a retail health consultant. “There’s certainly been a lot of improvement in canned foods — low-sodium alternatives, removing MSG, gluten and contaminants such as BPA.”

Steve Venenga, Hormel’s VP of Marketing for the grocery products segment, says Hormel products have evolved with the times. “Our focus is on how consumers’ lifestyles and shopping patterns are changing. Across the board, we’ve worked on keeping our ingredient lists cleaner.”

But how can we avoid the dietary minefields of the center aisles? “I always tell shoppers, ‘Don’t come to the store hungry; you’re more likely to make last-minute directions that aren’t the best,’” says Amy Peick, a dietician for Corbourn’s supermarkets in Minnesota. But if you’re really craving chips, she suggests varieties made with protein-rich beans instead of potatoes. In fact, a little planning will help you to quell the elevenses without running to the nearest convenience store, where snack options are few, pricey and not exactly good for you. Consider Natural Choice snacks, which include individual portions of meat (turkey, ham or chicken), cheese (cheddar or pepper jack) and even a small, chocolate-covered treat. Or try Valley Fresh single-serving pouches of white chicken, which can be thrown into a lunchbox or a briefcase to eat atop a homemade salad — a healthier and more affordable alternative to buying a chicken Caesar salad at the nearest cafe, says Taub-Dix. And don’t forget the freezer aisles — also located in those center aisles. That’s where you’ll find Jennie-O pre-cooked lean turkey meatballs, which, tossed together with spaghetti and red sauce, make for an easy and nutritious meal.

Vegetarian? High-protein plant-based options also abound on those center shelves. In addition to beans, you’ll find peanut, cashew and almond butters and Evolve and Muscle Milk’s protein bars and shakes, which contain a whopping 20 and 25 grams of protein, respectively.

In short, Taub-Dix says, “If you’re not shopping the center aisles, you’re missing out on many wonderful foods.”