

# Focus on Free-From Foods

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In 2020, trends like #quarantinebaking converged with people aiming to clean up their diets to protect their overall health. This pushed the “free from” market growth even further into the spotlight during a year affected by COVID. In a category that caters to 32 million people in the U.S. alone who have food allergies, brands had to keep up with demand while ensuring quality, which is always essential (2).

“With renewed interest in cooking and baking on a global scale, Bob’s Red Mill has been able to share its wholesome ingredients with more people than ever before,” said Matthew Cox, SVP Marketing for the company. “While the brand didn’t see shortages of raw materials, the increase in demand led to some temporarily unavailable products.”

Raw material shortages were a concern in general, though. “Given the pressures on supply chains around the world for raw materials, even containers, Fody had to work closely with its partners to manage inventory, output, and keep up with demand both online and in grocery stores,” said Steven Singer, Founder and CEO of Fody Foods, a Certified B Corp focused on

low-FODMAP, gut-friendly foods. “Sourcing some of our products in Italy meant great challenges were faced and pivoting was required. Our focus on supply chain continuity, top service levels, quality assurance and innovation never missed a beat.”

At Zego Foods, which says its facility is free from the top 12 allergens (as well as no corn or corn derivatives used on equipment, packaging or processing aids), keeping up with purity standards was the priority. “We’ve been testing our suppliers’ ingredients for years and have stayed with the ones with the cleanest, most pure product,” says Colleen Kavanagh, Founder and CEO. “For that reason, we aren’t inclined to switch suppliers unless we have to. But, we know that in an unstable time, some farmers and suppliers may make uncharacteristic sourcing or growing changes to stay afloat or fill an order.”

Also noting impacts to the farm-to-manufacturing process: “COVID-19 has made it easier for us to forge direct partnerships with local farms to source such ingredients because of restaurant business being down, but has also impacted our ability to get consistent supply,” said Ketan Vakil, Founder of Gourmend Foods, which focuses on low-FODMAP ingredients. “We want to stick with high quality domestic farms so sourcing at scale continues to be a challenge as farming resources are tight in some cases. Farms in the northeast are able to grow year round in colder climates with heated greenhouses, but heaters have been in short supply due to COVID, limiting how much can be grown this way.”

Given all that, it is essential to stock brands that work to ensure the quality of their ingredients and finished products and have clear labeling with certifications from reputable organizations like the Gluten-Free Certification Organization.

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### **Quick Tip**

“Millennials and Gen Z will continue to gain more buying power,” says Cox, “and food and beverage brands’ marketing strategies should be sure to include them and their values, which include authenticity, transparency and inclusion.”

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### **Selling Free-From**

Three things retailers should prioritize to stay relevant in this space: education, transparency, and innovation. This will be increasingly important as the consumer base grows. Between 1997 and 2011, the prevalence of food and skin allergies increased in children under 17 (3). “The fact that more Americans have been diagnosed with allergies is a good thing,” says Mark Overbay, Co-Founder and President, Big Spoon Roasters. “When people are empowered, they can improve quality of life.”

An important step to improving quality of life? Having trust in the supply chain. It’s all-encompassing—from stocking brands that know where the ingredients come from to providing an education to the consumer on a regular basis. One practical first step? Reading

labels. “Go beyond the trendy claims and take a close look at ingredients and nutrition facts,” says Overbay. “Too many ingredients are allowed to bear the ‘natural’ descriptor, in my opinion, and consumers depend on retailers to be the gatekeepers.”

A practical way of getting started, Singer suggests: Work with brands that provide handouts, shelf talkers, even recipe cards, to help customers more easily find the products they need on shelf and ways they can use them for maximum benefit.

And choose brands that innovate. “We are not only running a business, we are creating solutions for those with sensitive diets,” says Dave Heuvel, Co-founder and EVP of Sales, Smart Baking Company. “We want to make sure that we are continuously updating our products to include added benefits.” An example: Smart Baking saw a spike in interest in products that contain elderberry, and rolled out an elderberry-extract infused Apple Cinnamon Smartmuf’n.

At OMG...It’s Gluten Free, the brand has seen success in new products and varieties. “In a time when people are not eating out, are looking for healthy products, and want to support small businesses, keeping our products new and fresh has been a risk well worth the reward,” says Founder Julie Couzins.

A feel-good story for 2020 comes from Kaylee’s Culture. The allergen-free beverage brand for kids launched during the pandemic. “Our launching during COVID worked to our benefit as people have become more aware than ever before about probiotics and gut health,” says Kaylee McLaughlin, Founder and CEO. “Sparkling water has been trending for a while now and it doesn’t seem to be at a decline anytime soon.”

## **Cutting Sugar, Achieving Balance**

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Sugar and sweetened products play a complex role in American culture and diet, The Hartman Group reports. Consumers continue to avoid markers of processed foods and their key “red flag” ingredients, particularly sugars. Specifically, 76% of consumers are avoiding some type of sweetener (4). And that’s a smart move, of course, since favoring foods lower in sugar and calories can play a role in helping to balance blood sugar.

Zego’s Kavanagh reminds retailers that whole foods work well to balance sugar. Zego offers high fibrous oats and low glycemic bars that avoid sugar substitutes like monk fruit, stevia, or sugar alcohols.

Also offering oats: Bob’s Red Mill. “Oats are full of fiber, which makes them a sought-after whole grain for keeping you satiated throughout the day,” said Cox. “Oats are a blank slate and can be enjoyed any way you like—simple, sweet, savory, or spicy—and you can control the level of sugar you add. For easy oats on-the-go, we make single-serving oatmeal cups, and Peanut Butter & Oats bars.”

For a protein-rich treat, Once Again Nut Butter offers organic blanched almond butters that have 1g of net carbs and are a good option for those following a low-glycemic diet and people who are simply looking for lower-carb snack options, says Orr.

Also offering nut butters, Big Spoon Roasters was inspired by owner Mark's father, Gary "Big Spoon" Overbay, who used daily snacks of nut butter to help manage his blood sugar and Type 2 diabetes for decades. The brand's nut butters are low in sources of sugar (1-2g per 2-Tbs. serving) and blending them with milled nuts lowers the overall glycemic index of those sugars, the company says, adding that nut butters are inherently low-glycemic foods, are great sources of protein, and provide healthy fats.

## What's Trending

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**Plant-Based.** There's a growing interest in plant-based options with simple ingredients for sensitive dieters too, says Gael Orr, Director of Marketing, Once Again Nut Butter, which operates a peanut-free facility. The producer of organic nut butters utilizes ingredients that boast plant-based protein.

**Allergen-Free Baking.** Also hot: grain-free and gluten-free baking. To meet this growing demand, Bob's Red Mill released a new line of grain free baking mixes, which allows consumers with grain sensitivities the opportunity to enjoy their favorite treats like chocolate cake, brownies, blueberry muffins and flatbread, says Cox.

A staple of the gluten-free category highlighted through a boom in quarantine baking: breads and cookies. "Our gluten-free bread seems to be the showstopper at the moment," says Couzins. "It tastes exactly the same as real, gluten bread, and can be frozen before use, allowing our customers to enjoy each and every last slice."

**Innovative Flavors.** Another trend Orr is seeing? Innovative flavors. "We recently introduced three naturally flavored nut and seed butters: organic cashew butter with lemon, organic cashew butter with sea salt and caramel, and organic tahini with lemon, which are all free of preservatives, cholesterol and trans-fat and are also Non-GMO Project Verified, gluten-free certified, vegan, paleo-friendly, Keto, Kosher, and part of our Honest in Trade program."

Customers looking for sensitive diet foods are eating this way because they have to, not because they want to, adds Ashley Kohn, Founder & CMO, Prevail Jerky. These consumers want to be offered the same types of foods that everyone else gets to have and not have to compromise flavor for ingredients. For Prevail Jerky, the brand has seen consumer interest in unique flavor profiles like Umami, Lemongrass, and Ginger.

Along the same lines, consumers are looking for all-natural, vegan seasonings that are gluten- and lactose-free, and contain no additives, preservatives or fillers, says Onikepe Adegbola, M.D., Ph.D., Founder and CEO of Casa de Sante. The company's top-selling

product? Low-FODMAP certified seasonings made without onion and garlic. The brand utilizes ethically sourced animal and vegetable products as sustainability becomes a priority for natural product consumers.

Since consumers are learning more about FODMAPS in general, Fody continues to see growing interest in its offerings that are made sans garlic, onion, gluten, lactose, even honey or agave, says Singer. A few of its best-selling product lines are Sensitive recipe pasta sauce, Mild and Medium salsas, and garlic-infused olive oil.

Innovating age-old favorites with allergen-free offerings, Flax4Life has seen an interest in its Chocolate Brownies & Blueberry Muffins in the allergy-friendly, clean ingredient category. With flaxseed being the main ingredient in both products, they are a good source for omega-3s, fiber, and healthy proteins, says Kasondra Shippen, General Manager, Flax4Life.

**Non-Dairy Delight.** For the non-dairy crew, options abound, with the plant-based and nut-based “milk” market booming. The category ranges from almond, cashew, oat and macadamia—all with unique flavors. Ana Milicevic, Brand Director, siggi’s, says the company has seen a trend towards its Vanilla & Cinnamon flavor skyr, which is part of its first non-dairy, plant-based blend lineup.

**Convenience.** The biggest trend Smart Baking Company has seen is a shift toward convenience and grab-and-go products so people can eat on the move. “With increasingly busy schedules, people need a snack that can keep them on track and support sensitive diets,” said Heuvel. “Why shouldn’t gluten-free options be just as readily accessible as the alternatives?” **WF**

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