

# Craving Convenience

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Consumers may be spending more hours at home these days, but that doesn't mean they're not busy. For the parents who have taken on the role of full-time employee, full-time parent, and full-time chef, convenient eats have been key for smooth days at home with the kids. Better-for-you frozen foods and shelf-stable heat-and-serve options help take the stress out of getting three healthy meals on the table.

“Even in convenience, consumers are searching for products that are clean-label, and delicious. Consumers are looking for more variety as they spend more time at home,” says Nona Lim, CEO and Founder, Nona Lim. “While consumers may have turned to comfort brands during COVID, they are also looking for nutrient-dense products to boost their immune system. That is going to be important as consumers are going to continue to look for convenient and innovative cook-at-home solutions and grab-and-go products.”

People are leaning on frozen foods more than ever as a time saver to meet their demanding schedules, adds Fred Spencer, Co-Founder of AYO Foods. “It's been fun to watch this space rise to the occasion and deliver against the diverse needs of consumers.” Today's shopping

habits, he says, align with consumers' health goals and are geared towards small indulgences. He notes, "As we look at some of the varying needs of consumers, be it plant-based or allergen friendly diets, options have emerged to effectively address these needs."

## What's Trending

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**Diet-focused:** Ranging from keto and Paleo to plant-based, options targeted to specific food formulas and dietary needs are on the rise. One example: After curing his own autoimmune condition through clean eating on a Paleo diet, Kevin McCray launched Kevin's Natural Foods to help others improve their health. The company's sauces and entrees (including its top-selling Korean BBQ-Style Chicken entree) contain zero refined sugar and no artificial ingredients, grains, soy, dairy, antibiotics, or hormones.

"When it comes to getting dinner on the table quickly, everyone knows that tackling the center of the plate is the hardest part, so that's where we focused," says McCray. "With Kevin's entrées, dinner can be whipped up in less than 5 minutes, taste like you spent all day making it from scratch, and still meet the standards for the most strict lifestyle diets, such as Certified Paleo, Keto, and Gluten Free."

Upton's Naturals is also seeing an interest in heat-and-eat options for those following specialty diets. "Consumers are looking for convenient products that don't come with a laundry list of unpronounceable ingredients," says Natalie Slater, Marketing Manager. Upton's Naturals offers Meal Kits that are free of preservatives and feature pre-cooked noodles, fresh (never freeze-dried) vegetables, and spices for consumers following a vegan lifestyle. A top seller: Ch'eesy Mac, a pre-cooked, vegan macaroni and cheese made with nut-free, nutritional yeast-based cheese that is free of trans fat, cholesterol, GMOs, and artificial flavors.

Plant-based also is in demand. The global plant-based meat market alone is projected to reach \$13.8 billion by 2027 (2). Riding that tidal wave of sales is Atlantic Natural Foods, which offers a line of plant-based and shelf-stable heat-and-eat options under its Loma Linda brand, including Chipotle Bowls and Pad Thai. "Our meal starters have multiple use occasions, create the base for a semi-homemade meal and cut down significantly on prep time for family-favorite recipes," says Laura Lapp, Innovation Brand Manager at Atlantic Natural Foods. Loma Linda Meal Solutions pack 6g to 9g of plant-based protein per serving, and are non-GMO and gluten-free.

Recreating the flavors and texture of meats, Sweet Earth Foods offers Mindful Chik'n, a plant-based chicken made without cruelty, hormones, or antibiotics. This pre-prepared heat-and-eat option provides 19 grams of protein and 6 grams of fiber, while also being 100% vegan and non-GMO. And for plant-based eaters craving seafood, Good Catch offers New England Style Plant-Based Crab Cakes, Thai Style Plant-Based Fish Cakes, and Classic Style Plant-Based Burgers.

For consumers looking to up the flavor of meals without whipping up complicated recipes, Good Foods offers a line of plant-based dips including queso, buffalo, guacamole and tzatziki flavors. “Plant-based products are not only being sought after by core vegan or vegetarian consumers, but by shoppers aspiring to have a healthier diet or following a flexitarian lifestyle,” says Mandy Bottomlee, Marketing VP, Good Foods. “There has been an evolution of plant-based foods in terms of how much the market has improved the taste, texture and variety. Additionally, the access and influence of global diets is also shaping this category—inspiring flavors like romesco, pesto, and our plant based tzatziki.”

**Global appeal:** Whether the family is in the mood for Mexican, Asian, African, or perhaps Italian style dinner, convenience foods are being updated with flavors from around the globe. “Since the onset of the pandemic, people have been spending more time at home, recreating experiences from the comfort of home as travel, especially international, has been significantly reduced,” said Robin Herman, VP of Brand at Otis McAllister, parent company of Village Harvest. “Particularly in 2020, we have seen a rise in ethnic convenience food and products that cater to this. Bold flavors such as turmeric, Thai green curry and lemongrass are growing in popularity.”

Valued at \$36 million, the global ethnic foods market is projected to grow at a CAGR of 11.8% through 2024 (3). Herman points to industry reports showing that one third of consumers are willing to pay more for authentic ethnic food. Village Harvest offers ready-to-serve microwaveable rice and grains such as Thai Green Curry Rice (Thailand-produced), Coconut Turmeric Brown Jasmine Rice (Thailand-produced), and Basmati & Lentils (India-produced). The goal, Herman says, is to pave the way for easy-to-make ethnic and international cuisine.

Boasting West African traditions, AYO Foods offers West African inspired rice products. A top performer is Jollof Rice, which is celebrated across West Africa, according to Spencer. There’s added functionality too, he says. “We are using ingredients like Egusi which is incredibly rich in protein and Cassava Leaves which are a really good source of fiber.”

Crossing the ocean, Monsoon Kitchen offers Indian-inspired frozen meals, basmati bowls, and samosas. Chicken Tikka Masala Meal, a consumer favorite, is an aromatic, creamy, and traditional spiced tomato sauce that pairs with chicken and served over fragrant basmati rice, say Alex Torres and Andrea Mancini, Regional Sales Managers at Monsoon Kitchen. The company’s 12-oz entree ships frozen and, when slacked-out at the store level, has a 120-day shelf life and is certified gluten-free, plus contains 21 grams of protein.

For those continuing their commutes and in-office work schedules, grab-and-go picks are appealing, especially since it can be difficult to head out to a restaurant for lunch in some areas. Boasting Mexican inspired flavors, PJ’s Organics offers a line of frozen organic burritos for an easy heat-and-eat option.

Combining the two trends of diet friendly and ethnic flavors, the Nona Lim brand makes simple and clean ingredients a priority for consumers who follow the keto, Paleo and Whole30 diets with heat-and-sip soups, noodle bowls, noodles, broth pouches, and meal kits. Because of the pandemic, Lim has noticed that consumers are interested in boosting general health. A trend that the experts at The Hartman Group believe will continue (4).

**Kid-friendly fare:** Parents are looking for nutrient-rich options that are still easy—and of course the kids demand delicious. For the youngest ones, Serenity Kids offers Grass Fed Beef with Organic Kale & Sweet Potato and Free Range Chicken with Organic Peas & Carrots meat and veggie squeeze pouches. The pouches contain 5g of healthy fats and are low in sugar, and are said to be an ideal first food for babies. “Many parents struggle with first finding quality meat, then cooking, pureeing, storing, and ultimately having it end up on the baby—or floor—during mealtime,” says Joe Carr, President and Co-founder, and Serenity Carr, CEO and Co-founder. “We make all that easy with our meat/veggie squeeze pouches that babies and parents both love.”

Serenity Kids uses wild-caught and pasture-raised meat sourced from small American family farms that practice regenerative agriculture. “Pasture raised meat is higher in Omega 3 fatty acids, CLAs, vitamin E, iron, beta-carotene, and antioxidants such as glutathione and catalase, when compared to conventional meat,” Joe and Serenity explain. “When animals are treated well and fed nutrient-dense foods, they lead healthier and happier lives. It makes sense that if animals eat the diet nature intended for them, then their meat will have the nutrition nature intended for us.”

## **Merchandising Success**

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When positioning products, Lim advises, “Think less about merchandising based on purchasing category, and more along the lines of how consumers want to use the product, what else they need to use the product, and how they shop in the store.”

Also think about education, adds Mike Ryan, Vice President of Sales USA, PJ’s Organics. “Younger consumers have an insatiable appetite for education and knowledge about the food industry, overall. It’s important that retailers speak to that by becoming a source of education for their loyal shoppers, simply because it’s what they expect. Transparency is no longer a luxury, it’s a way of life.” **WF**

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