

Jerky Gets a Face-Lift

Premium and globally inspired attributes are transporting the meat snacks category into the realm of inspired flavors and funky formats

By [Kathleen Furore](#) on Apr. 12, 2019

Arby's might be the restaurant that boasts "We have the meats." But manufacturers and retailers alike have a chance to capture market share in meat snacks, a category industry projections show is well worth exploring. Recent research affirms the vibrancy of the category. According to Meat Snacks-Global Market Outlook (2017-2026), a report from Statistics MRC, the meat snacks category is expected to reach \$24.54 billion by 2026 at a compound annual growth rate of 43% during the forecast period. "Meat snacks is an area ripe for product development," says Meat Snacks: Accelerated Opportunity, a 2018 Trend Insight Report from [FONA International](#), Geneva, Ill. "It's the fastest-growing snack category with clear opportunity."

Improving Perceptions

For many consumers, "meat snacks" has always meant one thing: overly processed, sodium-laden jerky typically found at truckstops and convenience stores. But new formulations are giving the category a much-needed face-lift—one that is creating profit-generating possibilities in the category.

"Premium attributes are transforming the once negative perceptions of jerky and meat snacks," says Laurie Demeritt, CEO of Bellevue, Wash.-based The Hartman Group, a company that studies all aspects of food and beverage culture. "Culturally, we have witnessed increased consumer interest in several areas that align to meat snacks and jerky. Overall growth in the category reflects a premiumization of meat snacks around several attributes ... [which] can help alleviate some general concerns consumers have regarding jerky and meat snacks."

Premium Ingredients and Global Inspiration Driving Growth

Just what are those "premium attributes" [driving demand](#)? They include qualities that play into the food trends of the moment: protein/paleo associations, convenience and on-the-go snacking, organic and non-GMO foods, global cuisine and flavors, and fresh, less processed ingredients, The Hartman Group reports.

Take premium protein. According to FONA International, meat snacks have moved beyond basic beef jerky and are now being made with premium protein sources such as **grass-fed beef**, pasture-raised venison, cage-free turkey and chicken, and even, as FONA reports, “coho salmon said to be caught wild by Alaskan native peoples.” “Consumers are reaching for products that are better for the planet and that align with their values,” says Ellie France, brand manager of meat, snacks and prepared foods for Mighty Organic, a La Farge, Wis.-based maker of jerky, bars and sticks made with certified organic, humanely raised, non-GMO, antibiotic-free, **100% grass-fed beef** and free-range chickens. “Additionally, they are looking for cleaner options for protein. They don’t want any weird ingredients [or] toxic pesticides and are looking for animals raised as they should be with plenty of fresh air, pasture land and sunshine. They are also looking for sustainable or environmental connections like organic, grass-fed, agriculture—things that makes consumers feel good about how the animals and the land were treated.”

And then there’s the sense of culinary adventure pumping up the popularity of meat snacks. “Globally inspired flavors are prevalent among the jerky category. The inexorable march of globalization continues unabated,” Demeritt of Hartman says. “As in other food categories, herbs and spices with an international flair are appearing in meat snacks,” echoes insights from FONA, which points out that rosemary, basil, curry, chipotle, kimchi and adobo are among the ingredients delivering ethnic flavor to meat snacks today.

Case in point: Mighty Organic debuted Pineapple Chili and Chipotle Lime flavors to its line of beef jerky in early 2019 and Black Pepper and Sweet Chili to its line of Organic Chicken Bars in 2018.

Future Watch: Meat Snacks Go Meatless

The increasing popularity of plant-based foods is another trend beginning to wield influence in the meat snacks arena—think products made with beans, nuts, chia, flax, soy, seitan, mushrooms and kelp. The plant-based meat market will be worth \$5 billion by 2020, according to Fast Company.

Whole Foods Market even included faux meat snacks as a top 10 food trend for 2019. “Eating more plants doesn’t mean you have to forgo beloved meaty flavors and textures. Plant-based foods will continue to surprise and inspire, this year taking on the meat-based snacking world of jerkies and pork rinds you may associate with the corner store and road trips,” says an informational post on the retailer’s website,

which called out king trumpet mushrooms as playing a key role by “flexing their flavor and texture powers in tasty jerky, ‘pork’ rinds and ‘bacon’ snacks.”

As the FONA International report says, “Soy, seitan and mushrooms are used to mimic the texture of meat snacks, and companies will often use meat flavorings and classic meat snack flavors like beef, teriyaki, barbecue and mesquite in these products as well.”

Beyond jerky, innovative formats are also appearing on the market, such as cuts, strips, bars, pieces, chips, sticks and bites. So just what is the potential for retailers where meat snacks are concerned? And how can they and the companies that manufacture products in this burgeoning snack category succeed in the space? “As specialized diets, protein and convenience remain important to consumers, meat snack developers have room for continued innovation in flavor, form and ingredients,” according to FONA. And that means retailers and manufacturers who watch consumer trends closely—who understand, for example, the flavors and claims driving sales of meat snacks today as well as predictions for what will be driving them tomorrow—have ample opportunity to capture market share in this growing, quickly evolving category.