

Q&A Almonds

with
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From sideshow to main event: Exploring how almonds fit today's snacking trends

No one knows their way around a supermarket better than Lu Ann Williams. As a consultant to some of the world's most influential food and beverage companies, she's spent roughly the past quarter century engaged in a deep dive into what global consumers eat and drink—and why.

And if there's anything that all her trend, market and R&D analysis have told her, it's that the "snack aisle," per se, no longer exists. "If we look across all foods and beverages that we track," says Williams, who also serves as Director of Innovation at Innova Market Insights (The Netherlands), "we see 10-percent growth from 2013 to 2017 in launches with a snacking claim. So, snacking isn't just the cookie aisle or the potato chip aisle anymore. Snacking occurs across all categories."

Snacking occurs across all demographics, too. Consider that 63 percent of busy Millennials told Innova that they replace meals with time-saving snacks and that half of Gen X snackers say they're tilting away from sweet snacking¹. Also, 67 percent of Boomers now choose snacks that they believe will help them become healthier¹.

All of which puts the snacking spotlight on almonds. Why? As Williams explains, "Snacking isn't an optional extra anymore. It's the definitive occasion. That means you have to find snack ingredients that fit any occasion. Almonds fit just about every need people turn to snacks for. They really do check so many boxes."

So, we sat down with Williams to unpack a grocery bag of products that prove her point: with snacks finding a home in every sector of the supermarket, almonds are finding a home in every sort of snack.

Q Before we begin, let's explore how snacking, and snacks themselves, have changed in the past 10 years.

WILLIAMS | Snacks really do appear across every category in the grocery store now. Think about something like hummus or guacamole, these were just dips before, but they've become the essence of snacking today. Another great example is the snack boxes and kits you see in supermarkets and even coffee shops. One variety has cheese, fruit and almonds in it. The fact that you can now see a snack option in the cheese aisle is something you wouldn't have had 10 years ago.

Q I guess the corollary is that snack ingredients must be versatile?

WILLIAMS | You bet. Snacks have to fit lots of functions and lots of concepts. For example, I'm looking at a protein pack snack product right now that includes a hardboiled egg, white cheddar cheese and roasted almonds. And so many brands are understanding and working in this direction, even if it's very new for their product line.

Q And almonds are a fit due to their versatility?

WILLIAMS | Absolutely - almonds are very versatile and a key component of so many snacks. They go with meat, they go with fruit, they go with cheese, cereal, chocolate. They have a flavor that everybody likes with a good nutritional profile. Their texture profile is appealing, as well—they can be crunchy, or they can be creamy, depending on the form. And they are satisfying!

Q How do product developers know almonds will complement the other ingredients in the snack concepts they are formulating?

WILLIAMS | I don't think the question is if almonds will make a good match, but how many creative ways can we use them to make a good match? This is where all the different almond forms are so important. You can slice almonds, dice them, chop them, puree them. Almonds are also made into a flour, so a lot of gluten-free snacks are made with almond flour.

Q Let's look at snacks where you've seen almonds show up in creative new ways.

WILLIAMS | I'm looking at a flat seaweed crisp with sliced almonds in it. Isn't that cool? I never would've believed that you'd see almonds in a seaweed snack, but they're sliced thin and work so well.

I think that the almonds in protein snack packs are really interesting, too. I also notice that you're seeing more snacks using almond butter as a filling, and I've got two here that both have almond butter as a filling.

Q Can you share examples of snacks where almonds are the main event?

WILLIAMS | Just think about all the new products that use almond milk as the base for ice cream—which is a snack now of course — and how almond yogurt can be made with almond milk as the base. Almond butter is used as a snack dip like hummus or guacamole. I just had a snack mix last night that had all these little extruded pieces, but there were almonds in it as the main event. They just go with everything.

Q You mention almond milk; it's popularity reflects how much today's diets, like plant-forward, affect snacking. How do these diets affect R&D, and how do almonds fit in?

WILLIAMS | They're making an impact in a big way. One of the most interesting pieces of data that I saw this year is that six percent of Americans said they followed a keto lifestyle diet in 2018. And 13 percent said they followed a high-protein diet. That's huge. Nine percent followed plant-based diets, and then paleo and vegan were at three percent each. So, to me, that says there's a lot of room for almonds.

Q Sounds like we're barely scratching the surface of what almonds can bring to snacks. Where do you think they'll go next?

WILLIAMS | I always like to play the "If I were making a food product..." game, and I think it could be fun to see how you could make a snack cluster entirely with almonds. Imagine combining different forms of almonds in the same product: maybe thinly sliced almonds could be the base, and then you could use almond butter as a filling and put crunchy pieces on top. That would create a super-interesting mix of textures and shapes.

And that's just one example. So, with almond categories outside of whole, natural continuing to show growth, where almonds and snacking go next really depends on how wild your imagination can run.

Resources

¹Innova Market Insights Consumer Lifestyle & Attitudes Survey (2018)