

DAIRY MAKES SNACKING HEALTHY

Snacking is an undeniable part of the American diet, but it doesn't have to be an unhealthy part. Snacks with dairy ingredients offer salty, melty, crunchy, creamy satisfaction with a nutrition bonus. Food formulators can select from a variety of naturally nutritious dairy ingredients - including cheese, yogurt and whey protein - to bring a health halo to snacks.

Healthy snacks are not just about enjoying guilt-free flavor. According to Snacking Market Structure, a consumer behavior study by NuVista Strategies and sponsored by Dairy Management Inc., consumers said 51 percent of their snacking occasions were for nutritious reasons.

So consumers are looking for flavorful snack options that can help them stay within their nutrition intake goals. Dairy ingredients offer nutritional substance and consumer desirability and are often perceived as more wholesome and less processed than other snack ingredients and foods.

"Using low-fat dairy products as an ingredient is a natural way to reduce calories and fat while maintaining the flavor, texture and nutrition consumers are looking for in a healthy savory snack," says Laura Gottschalk, vice president of strategic market research with the U.S. Dairy Export Council's U.S. Dairy Ingredient Program.

Cheese is a natural for many snack applications for improved flavor, and is available in many forms to fit with the application goals of a product developer. In their traditional form, parmesan and cheddar cheeses in particular offer a saltiness and chewiness to breadsticks, crackers and warm

appetizers. A snack that incorporates 5g of grated parmesan cheese will provide 2-6 percent of the Daily Values of protein, calcium and phosphorus.

Product developers can use cheese powders, or dehydrated cheeses, to introduce a new version of an established snack food with added consumer appeal. Enzyme-modified cheeses blend natural, food-grade enzymes together with natural cheese to provide intense flavor profiles for snack products.

Yogurt and sour cream can be used as a main ingredient in dips and dressings, which are great to accompany favorite snacks like chips, pretzels and vegetables. Yogurt-based dips have been found to reduce the fat by more than 50 percent, compared to regular dips, while maintaining all the creaminess and rich flavor of the original product.

According to Kimberlee Burrington, dairy ingredient applications coordinator at Wisconsin Center for Dairy Research, Madison, Wis., whey protein is another dairy ingredient that plays an important role in snack product development. "Whey protein can increase crunchiness and nutritional content of chips and crackers and, depending on the amount used, can provide another high-quality protein source for snackers hoping to boost their protein intake," she said. Whey protein is also available in crisp form to add texture variety to salty or sweet snacks and nutrition bars.

The above is contributed by Sharon Gerdes, a food industry consultant who works with the U.S. Dairy Export Council.