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THE *not-chosen* ONE

Photo by Getty

Healthy Choice power bowls not the greatest choice, consumers say

Healthy Choice “remains the only major brand in the frozen meals category that can proudly call all its food ‘healthy,’” according to the brand’s website. Started in 1989 to solve problems the then-CEO had with his dietary choices, “Healthy Choice has had one goal: to give people a healthy option that’s as delicious as it is easy to prepare,” according to the brand. We were intrigued with a new single-serve variety from parent company Conagra Brands, which features ancient grains in a Mediterranean-inspired, tomato-based Spanish sauce. Let’s see what our diverse group of tasters had to say about Healthy Choice Power Bowls Roasted Red Pepper Romesco Chicken Pasta.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Evaluators ranged in age from mid-20s and up, with many frequently eating a frozen single-serve meal (most often for lunch).

FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND APPEARANCE

The Power Bowls package itself prompted a mix of confusion and skepticism from taste testers.

“Why is this called ‘Power Bowls’? Nowhere is an explanation given,” one wrote. Another commented, “I don’t know what an ancient grain is. It’s not something I’m going to look at and say, ‘Thank God it’s made with ancient grains,’ and pick it up because of that.” And a third suspected they were being oversold: “The back picture shows way more chicken than there would ever be.”

A couple others were intrigued, at least in theory. “It had a good amount of protein for only 200 calories,” one taste-tester said. “Perfect for lunch — in concept.” Another commented, “The package says, ‘Serving bowl made from plant-based fiber.’ That’s pretty interesting.”

But reactions upon opening the package and cooking the product were almost uniformly negative, starting with general comments. “After microwaving, the product looked NOTHING like the front of package. It was not bright red/orange; it was dull,” one taster wrote. Another said: “The dish looks amazing on the cover of the box; it does not look like that heated up. The meal looks deflated.” And a third commented, “It didn’t look very appetizing, even after mixing it up.”



PRODUCT

Healthy Choice
Power Bowls Roasted
Red Pepper Romesco
Chicken Pasta

PRICE

\$4.49/9-oz. single
serving

PLUS

Flavor and overall
taste worked for a
few taste-testers

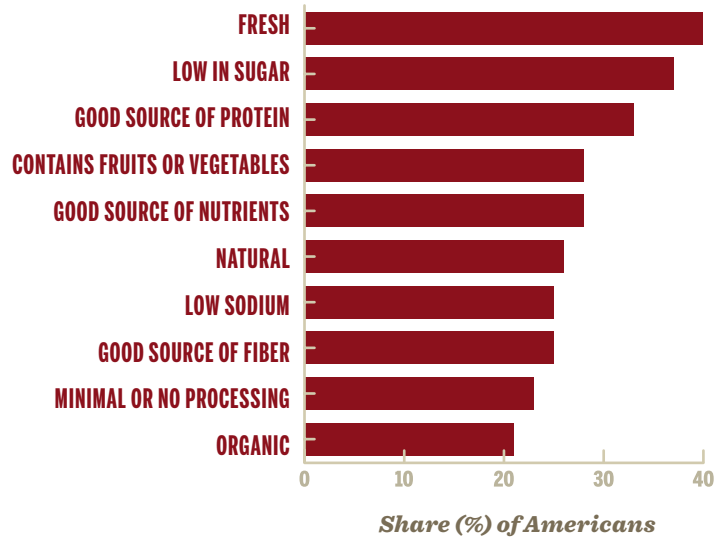
PROBLEM

Chewiness of chick-
en, texture, mixed
health benefits, lack
of heartiness

HEALTHY *vocabulary*

Americans associate a number of terms and descriptions with “healthy food,” according to recent research. “Fresh” was the most-associated term, with 40% of consumers equating it with healthy. “Good source of protein,” meanwhile, was No. 3 at 33%.

Source: IFIC; Greenwald & Associates



Remarks about specific aspects of the Power Bowl were even more scathing. “Oh wow, I didn’t even notice the chicken! Was there chicken in that bowl? Did I miss it?” one asked sarcastically. Another taster commented, “The picture has so many thick, big macaroni noodles, but I can probably count on one hand how many pieces of pasta I have in here. They’re tiny, small and breaking apart because they’re overcooked.” And a third wrote, “Once I opened the box, it looked like there was an overwhelming amount of leafy greens; like

way too much, where I thought it would overtake the taste of the dish. I also didn’t see a ton of chicken or pasta.”

TASTE, TEXTURE AND MORE

Once taste testers actually delved into the Power Bowl, a handful had more positive reactions on balance, saying that the entrée had at least surpassed their modest expectations. “Once I tried it, it was a complete surprise,” one commented. “It tasted very good, even with the heavy dose of greens and vegetables. The sauce had nice flavor, the chicken had good flavor (still very much like

any frozen chicken meal taste, though), and the pasta/vegetables were good.”

A second tester wrote: “I mixed it up thoroughly and noticed there was not that much pasta. I was pleasantly surprised when I began eating it, and the flavor was nice. It could have used a little salt, but otherwise very good.” And a third said, “We both thought it was a nice portion size and really liked the flavorful sauce. It was thick and creamy and really coated the pasta and vegetables nicely. The leafy greens were especially delicious, and the zucchini and squash had a nice, slight crunch to them.”

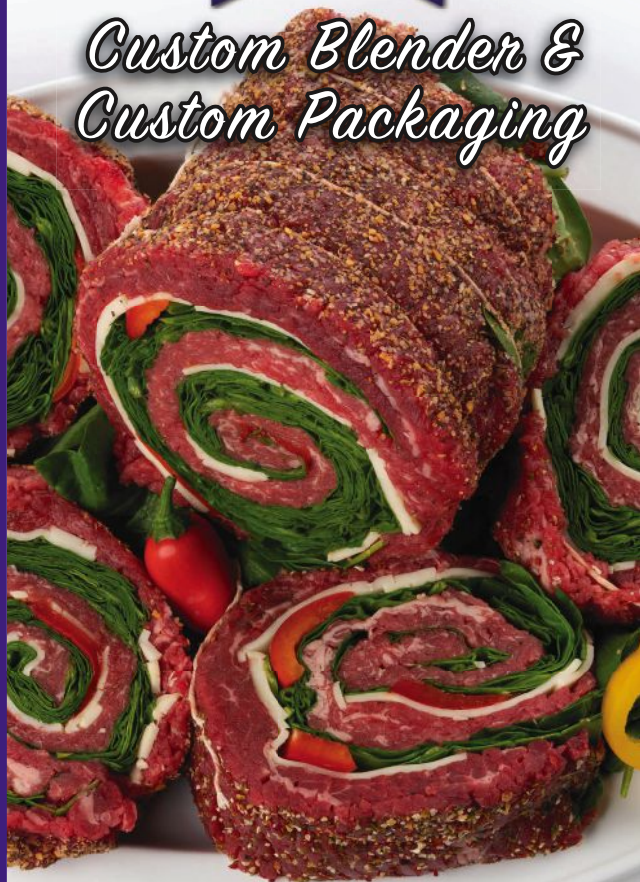
Some others had more mixed — and often, somewhat resigned — reactions, with chewiness a common complaint. “Typical frozen chicken,” one tester commented. “Very small pieces and a little chewy, but overall tolerable.” Another wrote: “The taste is really good, but it doesn’t look appetizing. And it’s very chewy, but that is to be expected anytime I get a frozen lunch like this.” And a third said, “I thought the chicken was a bit chewy and dry and the meal would be better without it; my husband liked the flavor of the chicken and wished there was a little more.”

Still others found the meal unsatisfying, inconsistent or shaky in terms of health claims, even if they liked the taste. “Not sure who would be satisfied with 200 calories for lunch. Not sure where this fits into meal planning,” one tester commented. Another said, “I thought it tasted good, but definitely not enough protein!” And a third wrote, “It had pretty decent flavor; the chicken tasted good. The sauce seemed congealed and thick and sat on the bottom, not spreading and coating everything. So, some bites had flavor when I got sauce and other bites didn’t.”



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TASTE *test*

*“After microwaving, the product looked **NOTHING** like the front of package.”*

Several had uniformly negative reactions, most commonly focused on the quality of the chicken. One described it as “tough, dry, and small; certainly not ‘marinated, tender, juicy and delicious’ or ‘pulled.’” Another said, “The chicken doesn’t taste ‘seasoned, marinated, juicy or tender.’” A third questioned the veracity of Healthy Choice’s marketing copy: “The back of the box says, ‘Each Ingredient Matters,’ but the ‘dark leafy greens’ are minced and the ‘seasoned chicken’ doesn’t taste seasoned.”

The overall texture was a negative for a couple others. One commented, “I’ve eaten these put-it-in-the-micro-wave, quick, easy lunches before. You get the gist that the food will be ‘ok,’ good flavor but a little bit slimy. And this is just what this is.” And another wrote, “When I peeled the film back, it looked like it had been eaten once already — a bowl of mushy mess. Not much flavor. Looks like it was all blended together.”

UPSHOT

In the end, only a few of the taste testers said they would

buy the Healthy Choice Power Bowl again. “At 200 calories, it was an overall nice meal for lunch (with a bag of chips),” one commented. “This is something I would certainly buy again!” Another said, “We really enjoyed this meal, and the fact that it’s low in calories. I would buy this again.” And a third wrote that they would repeat purchase, at least during their current life stage: “I could see myself buying a couple to have on-hand for work lunches. Life with a toddler doesn’t lend itself to a lot of vegetables being cooked and consumed, so I would be interested in getting some.”

But the majority said they would purchase it again reluctantly or definitely would not. “It was low in calories and fat, and had a decent amount of protein, but I would not buy again now that I tasted it,” one taster commented. Another wrote, “This should be a veggie bowl with pasta and chicken. I feel like I’m going to be hungry in an hour.” And a third provided a scathing reaction about the product and brand overall: “Totally disappointing, and turns us



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TASTE *test*

“It tasted very good, even with the heavy dose of greens and vegetables.”

off to future Healthy Choice products. We kept on saying ‘Where’s the meat?’ And what meat was there, was of horrible quality.”

CONCLUSION

This Healthy Choice Power Bowls Roasted Red Pepper Romesco Chicken Pasta offering was “fine” for a few, yet did not meet the needs or tastes of most. The SKU disappointed despite boasting a well-known brand name while delivering on both an appetizing front-of-the-package image and an impressive ingredient callout on the package. The connection between the package graphic and what you see when you take the product out of the

box is just unacceptable — which the company has heard repeatedly for 30 years. Some of those who often eat a frozen meal for lunch indicated that they are relatively content to settle on tolerating the overall texture, and especially the questionable chicken, in a frozen meal — but why are people willing to settle because “it is what it is”?

A major player in the category like Conagra Brands should lead the charge to deliver a higher-quality frozen chicken dish that people would actually crave. Who would purchase the product that most of us saw when we unboxed the meal, if that was the actual picture on the package?

by **Jacqueline Beckley, The Understanding & Insight Group, and Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, U&I Collaboration LLC**

Food product development and consumer research veterans, Jacqueline Beckley, Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, join Meetingplace Magazine as regular contributors to MeetingTaste, a consumer sampling of new products featured in our monthly Taste Test column. Here’s how the program works: The meat item is distributed to consumers, including the core demographic, for preparation in their own houses. No instructions are provided to the consumer, other than to write their overall impressions of the product, as well as to evaluate the flavor, texture, packaging and ease of use. Beckley, Cesario and Vahalik look for common threads by using Getting It!, a system developed to listen to consumers about products. The sample of people is not intended to be a ‘taste test’ in a controlled setting, nor is it intended to simulate a focus group. Others are doing both. Rather, the intent is to interpret the response of the people who might purchase a product like this and use it, simply based on their encounters with the product in their individual, unique home environment. That is how U&I has been developing cutting-edge product and people understanding since 1999.