

Alternatives to Peanut Butter Are Taking Over Lunch

Cashew and almond butters, hazelnut and cookie spreads all have plenty of protein and, in some cases, sugar

Peanut butter may be under assault but the aisle is exploding with alternatives. It branches further afield into all stripes of chocolaty butters, helped by what one analyst call the “Nutella factor.” WSJ's Anne-Marie discusses on Lunch Break With Tanya Rivero.

By ANNE MARIE CHAKER

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Do you want seven-seed power fuel in your lunchbox or cookies 'n' cream hazelnut on white?

So goes a potential weekday morning conversation between parent and child in any U.S. home these days. It's the result of an explosion of new nut butters and chocolate-swirled confections in the aisle once known for creamy, chunky and smooth peanut butter.

Now there are rows of spreads targeting the healthy food trend follower, such as almond or cashew butters with seeds like chia touting their antioxidant qualities. They sit alongside cookie butter, Nutella or decadent treats with flavors such as white chocolate wonderful and dark chocolate dreams. The time-honored peanut butter and jelly seems downright boring.

Gina Ghertner, a Washington, D.C.-area mother, buys sunflower butter instead of peanut butter, partly because of restrictions at her children's school due to the prevalence of peanut allergies. She packs sunflower butter at least once a week for her three boys, 8-year-old Arjan, 4-year-old Gabriel and 2-year-old Jaimal. She usually spreads it with fig jam on two slices of whole-wheat bread. "The sunflower butter is a little more sweet" than peanut butter and combines nicely with the slight bitterness of the jam, she says.



Spreads, clockwise from top left: Jif Cookies 'n Cream Hazelnut, MaraNatha Dark Chocolate Almond, Barney Butter Raw and Chia Almond Butter, MaraNatha Roasted Cashew Butter, Jif Chocolate Cheesecake Hazelnut, Bonne Maman Strawberry Preserves (on knife), Organic NuttZo Seven Nut and Seed Butter, Organic Adriatic Fig Spread (on knife), Lotus Biscoff Cookie Butter (center) *PHOTO: MARKO METZINGER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLED BY ANNE CARDENAS*

Nut restrictions at schools and daycare centers are driving interest in alternative spreads, food marketing and retail experts say. More than a third of U.S. school districts ban

certain foods, and 93% of those ban peanuts, according to a 2014 survey of 1,102 school districts by the School Nutrition Association. Peanuts are one of the food allergens most commonly associated with anaphylaxis, a potentially deadly reaction that impairs breathing. Tree nuts, which include almonds, were a distant second in the survey, cited by nearly 40% of districts.

According to Netherlands-based Innova Market Insights, which tracks new products, the number of new cashew and almond butters is growing while peanut-butter launches are declining. In the first eight months of 2015, peanut butter had a 45% share of nut butter launches, down from 58% in 2014, while almond butter's share grew to 26%, up from 20%. Overall, sales in the \$1.9 billion peanut butter market declined 4% in the year that ended Aug. 8, according to Chicago research firm IRI.

"The other big driver is the Nutella effect," says Lu Ann Williams, Innova's head of research. The Italian chocolate-hazelnut spread has finally gone mainstream in the U.S., and food companies are introducing their own versions of the after-school treat.

Earlier this year, [J.M. Smucker Co.](#)'s Jif peanut-butter brand added two new hazelnut spreads—Chocolate Cheesecake and Cookies 'n Cream—to a lineup that also includes Chocolate and Salted Caramel. Jif also sells almond butter and cashew butter.

More flavor options mean more ways to serve and eat spreads throughout the day, says spokeswoman Maribeth Burns. Someone might spread peanut butter on a sandwich for lunch, she says, then reach for almond butter with fruit as a snack, and chocolate-hazelnut spread as a bedtime indulgence.

Consumers perceive a health halo around nuts because they

are a great source of protein; benefits of unsaturated fats have given spreads a boost. Nut butters are “a hero food that have grown up in the shadow of all the positive nut marketing,” says Kara Nielsen, culinary director at Sterling-Rice Group, a Boulder, Colo., consulting firm. Still, it’s worth remembering that sugar is the first ingredient in Jif’s chocolate cheesecake-flavored hazelnut spread. And Biscoff, a crunchy “cookie butter” from Lotus Bakeries, is made from Belgian cinnamon cookies that have been known as airline treats. “The cookies are first baked, then crushed, then mixed with vegetable oil, and that’s really about it,” says Idil Kozaoglu, direct marketing manager for Lotus Bakeries North America, the brand’s San Francisco distributor.

Consumers may think they are reaching for something healthy with hazelnut butter, which manufacturers often combine with chocolate. But protein content tends to be much lower, and added sugars much higher, than peanut butter or almond butter. Consumers should look for oil separation in their nut butters, says Toby Smithson, a registered dietitian and spokeswoman for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. The separation may make these spreads a bit more difficult to use, but it indicates fewer added ingredients. She also advises reading labels to find products with few or no added ingredients.

It is hard to beat plain old peanut butter for nutritional bang for your buck. A 16-ounce jar of Peter Pan crunchy peanut butter at Safeway in Silver Spring, Md., costs \$3.59, and each 2-tablespoon serving contains 200 calories, 16 grams of fat and 8 grams of protein. A 12-ounce jar of Jif creamy almond butter costs \$8.99 and a comparable serving has 190 calories, 16 grams of fat, and 7 grams of protein. U.S. almond production has declined in recent years resulting in

higher prices, according to the U.S. Agriculture Department. NuttZo's Original Peanut Seven Nut & Seed Butter, made with cashews, peanuts, hazelnuts, sunflower seeds and flax seeds, costs \$14 or more for a 16-ounce jar. Power Fuel, a peanut-free version, costs \$17 or more a jar.

Hain Celestial, which makes MaraNatha almond butter, says their research shows more shoppers are ditching bread and crackers and eating nut spreads straight out of the jar. "With spoons becoming the instrument for nut butter, it makes sense for more indulgent and unique varieties to come into the space," says Maureen Putman, president of grocery and snacks. Plus, there are no extra calories and carbohydrates from bread.

MaraNatha has launched a dark-chocolate almond spread, followed by maple almond, caramel almond, coconut and coconut-almond spreads. She says because consumers view the almond spreads as a natural food, with 4 to 5 grams of protein per 2-tablespoon serving, "you don't feel guilty." Barney Butter almond butters now offer more grown-up variations, including Vanilla Bean and Espresso, Cocoa and Coconut, and Honey and Flax. Dawn Kelley, a co-owner of Barney & Co. California, based in Fresno, says she experimented in her kitchen to come up with combinations she thought would be "craveable." She says one of her favorite sandwiches is brie cheese and sliced pears, with Honey and Flax almond butter.

Juli Dimos, creative director at a Denver marketing agency, says at any given time she'll have five jars of nut butter in her fridge and pantry. Currently, she has two jars of almond butter, one of cashew butter and one of coconut-peanut butter. That one is "like candy," she says, and she keeps it hidden from her children, 12-year-old Lucy, 10-year-old

Mercy, and 6-year-old Ezra. “I don’t like to share that one,” she says.

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OF ALL THE NUTS ON THE STORE SHELF: A HIGHLY UNSCIENTIFIC SAMPLING

If you want to feel virtuous: Nuttzo’s original peanut seven nut & seed butter.

If you really love a hazelnut latté: Barney Butter vanilla bean & espresso.

If you don’t mind a green sandwich: An SB&J of MaraNatha sunflower butter & fig jam.

If you like the smell of sunscreen: Barney’s coconut cocoa almond butter.

If what you really want is a cupcake: Jif chocolate cheesecake.

If you’re sneaking a midnight snack: Jif cookies ‘n cream.

If you’re a grown-up: Barney’s Honey flax almond butter.

If you just want to make a sandwich: MaraNatha cashew butter.

Ultimate crowd-pleaser: Biscoff cookie butter.