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From the Baltimore Sun

Healthier choices for those on the go

Salads join salty snacks on convenience store shelves

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Sun reporter

November 30, 2006



Carrot and celery sticks. Garden salad topped with grilled chicken. Hummus and organic iced teas.

This isn't the kind of fare typically found at convenience stores. But consumers are seeing more fresh fruits and vegetables in convenience store cases right next to the traditional munchies like preservative-packed desserts and bags of salty snacks.

Demand for healthy food options continues to grow, along with concerns about trans fat and rising obesity rates. In response, even convenience stores are offering healthier, on-the-go food items.

Local stores like Royal Farms and national chain 7-Eleven began offering healthier food items this year, joining dozens of fast-food chains and others in providing more nutritious offerings.

Prices for sliced pineapple and fresh salads may cost a bit more than the 99 cent candy bar - salads can cost as much as \$4 or \$5 - but convenience store owners said consumers are willing to pay.

"I think you are seeing more and more convenience stores introducing a healthy line of foods," said Jeff Lenard, a spokesman for the National Association of Convenience Stores, a trade association that represents 4,000 retailers and supply companies. "As [customers] are evolving with their tastes, they're looking for healthier, more upscale options and may not want a hot dog everyday."

Since "quick and easy" is what consumers are looking for, convenience stores have expanded to accommodate them. From coffee to gas to breakfast, lunch and dinner, convenience stores have evolved in recent years into popular shopping spots for busy commuters.

Lenard said that's one reason convenience stores are willing to deal with the shorter shelf lives of perishable food such as fruits and vegetables.

"There is a greater cost associated with having to worry about spoilage and other matters related to fresh food," Lenard said. "But the cost is probably greater in not doing it, in terms of lost business and the cost of being left behind."

Royal Farms, the Baltimore-based convenience store chain with more than 100 locations in Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and Virginia, this year began supplementing its popular fried chicken and western fries with a line of healthier foods, such as fresh fruit cups, whole fruit, sushi and five different salads. While wraps and cold sandwiches have been available for years, they've also been included in the healthier line.

The additions, now available in 42 stores, are a response to customers' requests for healthier options, said Michael Jackson, merchandising and pricebook manager for Royal Farms. Although Royal Farms did not disclose sales figures, demand has been strong enough that the chain is expanding its "Good to Go" line to each of its locations by the end of next year, said Frank Schilling, director of marketing and merchandising.

At Pennsylvania-based Wawa stores, which has more than 500 locations in five states, fresh foods have been available since the chain's opening in 1964, said spokeswoman Lori Bruce. But changes in customers' eating habits have led to more products being offered, Bruce said.

Along with its traditional hoagies and hot sandwiches, Wawa now offers products like low-fat chicken noodle soup and sliced apples with caramel. This month the chain began offering light Wawa brand fruit punch and lemonade drinks with fewer calories than regular versions.

Dallas-based 7-Eleven, with about 5,800 stores in the United States and Canada, launched its "Pick Smart" line this January. All of the products, which include sandwiches, grilled items and packaged baked goods, have no more than 10 grams of fat and 420 calories.

Food consultants say that although increased health awareness has sparked change, convenience is still the top priority.

The NPD Group, a consumer market and research firm, conducted a study this year citing convenience as the first thing Americans look for when choosing food - health ranked second in importance. The 2006 Eating Patterns in America report tracked the daily habits of thousands of Americans over 12 months.

At Royal Farms, the healthier items are placed together in a refrigerated case to make them easy to find. The fruit and vegetable cups are designed to fit in a car cup holder.

Offering quick, healthy food is the only way convenience stores can compete against grocery stores and fast-food restaurants that have larger selections, said one marketing professor.

"Convenience stores really cater to people who are on the go, and if you don't have what they're looking for, you're not going to make money," said Arun K. Jain, professor of marketing at the University at Buffalo.

For healthy food programs to be successful, low prices are a must, Jain said. He said the fresh products must be comparable to their less-healthy counterparts so customers will buy them.

"Like doughnuts and coffee - it has to be sold in that fashion," Jain said. "If you start charging \$5 or \$6, they're not going to buy it."

Some customers say they like the added choices. But they expect and enjoy the fried food, candy bars and other convenience store staples.

"I'm sure people are becoming more and more health conscious, and [stores] have to keep up with the times," said Foyce Mackey, 31, of Baltimore.

Mackey said he eats lunch at Royal Farms at least four times a week. Although he still eats fried chicken once a month or so, he typically buys a healthier submarine sandwich most days.

One nutritionist said the move by convenience stores can't hurt, but that consumers' health depends on their own choices.

"I don't think the average person who doesn't already eat that way is going to go in the store and see the carrots and pick them up," said Dr. Ann Kulze, a nutritionist and author of Dr. Ann's 10-Step Diet. "People who buy [the healthy food] already know what they will buy."

And despite the changes, Royal Farms doesn't plan to abandon its more traditional foods - including the fried chicken.

"The truth is," said Schilling of Royal Farms, "we haven't completely forsaken our roots."

New food options

Convenience stores have added healthier fare recently to meet consumer demand. Some new items include:

- Caesar salad with grilled chicken: (\$4.79 at Royal Farms)
- 5-ounce fruit cup: (\$1.99 at Royal Farms)
- Celery and carrot sticks with ranch dressing: (\$2.29 at Royal Farms)
- 16-ounce light lemonade or fruit punch: (99 cents at Wawa)
- Ham sandwich on wheat bread: (\$2.89 at 7-Eleven)
- Turkey submarine sandwich: (\$2.09 at 7-Eleven)

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