

# Raising the Bar

## *Choosing Healthy Snack Bars versus Gimmicky Junk Food*



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A REPORT BY THE CORNUCOPIA INSTITUTE | DEC 2017



The Cornucopia Institute wishes to thank the foundations that support our research and the thousands of family farmers and organic advocates who fund this work with their generous donations.

*The Cornucopia Institute is chartered as a tax-exempt public charity focusing on research and education. Cornucopia aims to empower organic producers, consumers, and wholesale buyers to make discerning marketplace decisions, protecting the credibility of the organic food and farming movement and the value it delivers to society.*

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# Executive Summary

**SNACK BARS ARE PERCEIVED** as a healthy convenience food, easy for the beach, a hike, or a lunchbox. Whether marketed as “granola,” “protein,” “energy,” or “nutrition” bars, they have become wildly popular, representing an \$8.3 billion industry with double-digit annual growth.<sup>1</sup>

Packaged, ready-to-eat bars are heavily marketed with a dizzying array of health claims. **This report addresses:**

- Whether the health claims are legitimate or just marketing hype;
- What is really in the bars; and,
- Whether some bars are healthier than others.

## Major Findings

The majority of mass-market bars contain long ingredient lists with unfamiliar chemical names. In contrast, certified organic bars have far fewer and much simpler ingredients that are, in many cases, nutritious whole foods.

Many companies charge higher prices for “natural” products when there is little, if any, difference from other, less expensive conventional products. Many popular natural brands shower themselves in “do-gooder ethos” but stop far short of actually fulfilling a legitimate mission, especially when they make the choice to source conventional ingredients.

While the “natural” claim is virtually unregulated, there are two organic labels that are regulated:

**The first label is “made with” organic ingredients.** Products can carry this label if 70% of the ingredients, by weight, are certified as organic. The remaining 30% of ingredients, by weight, can be non-organic.<sup>2</sup>

**The second label is USDA organic.** The presence of the organic seal indicates that a minimum of 95% of the ingredients, by weight, are certified organic.

The USDA organic seal indicates that a specific product was produced without toxic pesticides, insecticides, or herbicides, and processed without potentially harmful chemicals, an assertion that is government-regulated and third-party certified.

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The USDA label is highly regulated. In contrast, the “made with” organic ingredients claim is regulated, but loopholes exist which diminish the quality and health benefits of those products.

For instance, solvent extraction is not allowed to be used for products that carry the USDA organic seal. However, the USDA organic regulations specifically provide an exception to allow solvent extraction to be used on products that carry the “made with” organic claim.<sup>3,4</sup> “Natural” ingredients can also be processed with neurotoxic and polluting petrochemicals, such as hexane.<sup>5</sup>

Common non-organic ingredients that are almost universally processed with volatile solvents include soy pro-

**For the healthiest choice, bars should only contain naturally sweet whole foods like dried fruit with naturally occurring antioxidants, vitamins, and fiber.**



tein isolate, soy protein concentrate, and soy lecithin.<sup>6</sup> Low levels of hexane are commonly found in ingredients extracted with the neurotoxic chemical.<sup>7</sup> These highly modified ingredients are used to artificially inflate the protein content of snack bars and change their texture.

In addition, these processed soy-based ingredients almost exclusively come from GMO soybeans that have been sprayed multiple times with glyphosate (i.e., “RoundUp-ready” soybeans). The USDA organic regulations require all ingredients to be produced without GMO’s - including the 30% of non-organic ingredients in “made with” organic ingredients products.

However, this “excluded method” is difficult to enforce for the 5-30% of conventionally sourced ingredients in “made with” organic ingredients products.

In addition to conventional soy protein isolate, soy lecithin, and soy protein concentrate, bars labeled “made with” organic ingredients often contain glycerin, palm oil, nuts, and fruit, which are comparatively more expensive to buy organically.

Some of these conventional crops, such as soybeans, cacao (i.e., chocolate), fruit, and nuts are typically produced with high levels of toxic agrichemicals. Organic versions of these ingredients are usually commercially available and, by law, are not allowed to be produced with toxic pesticides, GMO ingredients, or processed with hexane.

Some of the most popular conventional ingredients in snack bars (i.e., chocolate, fruits, and nuts) have the high-

est rates of pesticide applications and, when the products are dried, agrichemical residues become concentrated, making it extremely important to ensure that these ingredients are certified organic.<sup>8</sup>

When a company uses the “made with” organic ingredients claim, it’s likely that they have chosen to use one or more relatively inexpensive organic ingredients, such as oats, tapioca syrup, or rice flour. This enables them to legally use the words “made with organic” on the packaging, but not the USDA seal. This rule allows the word “organic” on the front package, even though up to 30% of the contents are not organic.

Choosing to buy from companies that commit to the USDA organic seal rather than the “made with” organic ingredients label rewards ethical choices for the sourcing of all ingredients. There are many companies that are cutting corners to enhance profitability by including conventional ingredients, all while embracing rhetoric proclaiming their commitment to organics in their marketing materials.

The following report and accompanying scorecard will help consumers find snack bars that offer nutritious organic ingredients that support human and environmental health, while avoiding those that use disingenuous “natural” and “made with” organic ingredients claims that depend on cheap, conventionally grown and/or synthetic ingredients.

## **How to find the healthiest snack bars for you and your family**

1. **Buy certified organic products.** The USDA organic seal indicates that a snack bar was produced with a minimum of 95% organic ingredients by weight (the remaining 5% has to be ingredients that are not available organically and that are reviewed for safety, such as baking powder). The organic rules require verification that all USDA certified organic snack bars are non-GMO and free of toxic solvent extraction. The “made with” organic ingredients label allows up to 30% of the product to be conventionally sourced, including ingredients extracted with hexane.
2. **Support companies that exclusively manufacture and offer USDA certified organic products.** These companies are truly dedicated to the values that come with the organic label, including protecting farmworkers, consumers, and the environment from exposure to toxic herbicides, pesticides, and processing aids. Other companies with mixed organic and non-organic offerings are likely exploiting the price premium they can get for organic products, rather than fully making the commitment to support the ethos behind the organic food and farming movement.

3. **Look for whole ingredients.** Many of the healthiest snack bars are produced predominantly with nuts, seeds, and dried fruit. Protein isolates, syrups, calcium caseinate, chicory root, and “milk ingredients” are common examples of highly processed ingredients that are not whole foods.
4. **Avoid protein isolates, especially those that are not labeled organic.** Pea, whey, and soy protein isolates are conventionally processed with synthetic solvents like hexane that can remain in the food after processing. Protein isolates are a cheap way to increase the protein content of bars, rather than using more expensive whole foods, such as nuts and seeds. Some bars list protein isolate as the first ingredient. Extraction with volatile synthetic solvents, such as hexane, is a prohibited method in all certified organic products, but not “made with” organic ingredients products. Be aware that if a protein isolate isn’t listed as “organic” on the ingredients label, it is likely hexane-extracted and made from GMO soybeans.
5. **Choose bars with lower levels of added sweeteners.** Organic cane sugar, honey, and maple syrup are better than artificial sweeteners or refined non-organic sugar. However, for the healthiest choice, bars should only contain naturally sweet whole foods like dried fruit with naturally occurring antioxidants, vitamins, and fiber. At a minimum, be aware of the high sugars found in some nutrition bars and treat them as a dessert.
6. **Choose bars without added flavors and colors.** Added flavors and colors, even “natural” flavors and colors, are only necessary when lower quality ingredients are used instead of whole foods. Often, they are added to improve the flavor of products that have been highly processed. Synthetic colors and flavors can be a health risk and are prohibited in organic foods.
7. **Choose bars without harmful synthetic and non-organic preservatives, emulsifiers, and gums.** Common bar preservatives with known negative health effects include butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT) and butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA). Safer, natural preservatives are ascorbic acid, lactic acid, citric acid, tocopherols, and rosemary oil. Emulsifiers and gums, such as sorbitan monostearate, xanthan gum, carrageenan, acacia gum, and guar gum are unnecessary ingredients and known inflammatory agents.<sup>9</sup>

There are hundreds of options in the snack bar aisle. This report and accompanying buyers’ guide will help consumers support companies that are fully committed to supporting the environmental and health benefits of organic food and farming. It is possible to distinguish between truly healthy snack bars and those that should be considered desserts or even junk food.

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### ARTIFICIAL FLAVORS WITH 49 CHEMICALS, INCLUDING THE FOLLOWING:

A typical artificial strawberry flavor, like the kind found in a fast food strawberry milk shake, contains the following ingredients:

amyl acetate, amyl butyrate, amyl valerate, anethol, anisyl formate, benzyl acetate, benzyl isobutyrate, butyric acid, cinnamyl isobutyrate, cinnamyl valerate, cognac essential oil, diacetyl, dipropyl ketone, ethyl acetate, ethyl amyl ketone, ethyl butyrate, ethyl cinnamate, ethyl heptanoate, ethyl heptylate, ethyl lactate, ethyl methylphenylglycidate, ethyl nitrate, ethyl propionate, ethyl valerate, heliotropin, hydroxyphenyl-2-butanone (10 percent solution in alcohol), a-ionone, isobutyl anthranilate, isobutyl butyrate, lemon essential oil, maltol, 4-methylacetophenone, methyl anthranilate, methyl benzoate, methyl cinnamate, methyl heptene carbonate, methyl naphthyl ketone, methyl salicylate, mint essential oil, neroli essential oil, nerolin, neryl isobutyrate, orris butter, phenethyl alcohol, rose, rum ether, g-undecalactone, vanillin, and solvent

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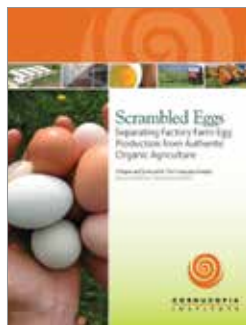
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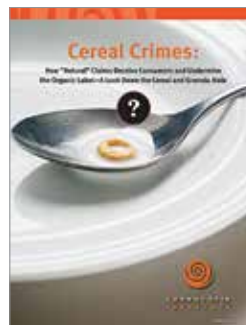
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