

Are “paleo snacks” an oxymoron?



Recently, a well-meaning patient, apparently inspired by my foray into the Whole30, brought me a Paleo “bar” as a treat. The gesture was appreciated, and I was thankful, but after the patient left, I perused the ingredients: Dates, Egg Whites, Pecans, Cashews, Sea Salt, Natural Maple Flavor. What could possibly go wrong?

The Nutrition Facts disclosed that one bar—easily consumed in 30 seconds—delivered a not-inconsiderable 210 calories with 22 grams of carbohydrates, 16 grams of which were sugar (from the dates—“natural,” but sugar nonetheless).



In the interest of science I tried it—and it was delicious! The flavor maestros at the natural products company that makes this bar had nailed it, and produced a scrumptious “legal” facsimile of a conventional energy bar.

One of the salient features of the Whole30 Diet—and what makes it so effective—is that it calls for adherents to completely forego sugar—in all its forms.

Melissa Hartwig, co-developer of the Whole30 and a recent guest on *Intelligent Medicine* writes:

“Remember, added sugar is about the ingredients, not the nutrition label. The amount of sugar listed on the nutrition label has nothing to do with whether something is Whole30 or not. . . Look for any form of sugar (real or artificial) in the ingredient list. If it’s there, it’s out for your Whole30.”

In the case of the bar in the example above, there is no added sugar—fructose, cane juice, apple or grape juice concentrate, agave syrup, honey, maltitol, dextrose or any of the numerous weasel words that are used in lieu of “sugar”—among the disclosed ingredients. But the wary Whole30 diet adherent needs to know that dried fruits like dates, while “natural,” are laden with sugar!

Thus, this admonition from Hartwig:

“Do not try to re-create baked goods, junk foods, or treats with ‘approved’ ingredients. Continuing to eat your old, unhealthy foods made with Whole30 ingredients is totally missing the point, and will tank your results faster than you can say ‘Paleo Pop-Tarts’; Remember these are the same foods that got you into health-trouble in the first place—and a pancake is still a pancake, regardless of the ingredients.”

Nevertheless, ingenious food marketers are working overtime to create delicious Paleo snacks and treats which subvert the original intent of programs like the Whole30: To fundamentally alter your relationship with food, and enable your body to undergo a metabolic “reset” wherein you rediscover the intrinsic flavors of real whole foods, lose your cravings, and eat in moderation, at regular mealtimes, with appropriate intervals in between. That’s the key to staying thin and free of the degenerative diseases associated with dietary excess.

Intrinsically, snacking goes against the Paleo ethos. I don’t want to sound like a stern food-cop, but it just doesn’t fit the paradigm. Primitive hunter-gatherer cultures didn’t just

reach into the larder for a Paleo bar or a bag of Paleo chips; they endured hardship and deprivation and periods of intermittent fasting when food wasn't readily available. The ability to withstand intervals of food abstinence is a hallmark of optimal metabolic adaptation. It allows negative caloric balance which draws down fat stores, rests the digestive machinery, heals inflammation, restores mental focus and concentration, and even reboots the immune system.

Additionally, while you should enjoy the intrinsic flavors of natural whole foods like vegetables, meats, fruits and nuts (albeit the latter two in relative moderation), food that is too "yummy" blasts your taste buds, lights up appetite centers in your brain and doesn't enable you to undergo withdrawal from the addictive treats you've come to rely upon. Substituting with Paleo facsimiles simply perpetuates cravings that will sabotage long-term compliance with your newly-healthy diet.

That goes for Paleo chips, bars, crackers, and bread substitutes, as well as rich desserts, even if made of compliant ingredients.

The co-optation of Paleo exemplifies a phenomenon that has pervaded the natural products industry from the time I began my career 35 years ago. It's the gradually morphing of super-healthy diet regimens into commercialized products that betray the original intent of the diets they're supposed to represent.

When I was Macrobiotic in the 70s, a whole raft of "Macrobiotic" treats, candies and desserts were introduced to tempt acolytes who were getting played out on brown rice, tofu, beans, greens and seaweed.

Subsequently, when the Atkins Diet was in vogue, marketers rose to the occasion with artificially-sweetened "low-carb" desserts of dubious nutritional value.

When “gluten-free” became a buzzword, food companies obligingly began cloning gluten-free bagels, English muffins, waffles, pizza, even Oreos—often with ingredients far more caloric than the wheat flour they were designed to replace!

At a recent natural products trade show that I attended, Paleo was clearly the new buzzword for food marketers. A whole cottage industry has sprung up to purvey them. There’s a false “health halo” around Paleo snacks that may rationalize your over-indulgence, undermining your diet goals to the benefit of makers of these pricey, processed products. If you’re earnest about making a real transformation in health, minimize your dependency on them and stick to whole foods, simply prepared.

For more guidance on the Whole30, check out Melissa Hartwig’s new book, *Food Freedom Forever: Letting Go of Bad Habits, Guilt, and Anxiety Around Food*. After she completes her book tour, she’s promised us an encore appearance on a future *Intelligent Medicine* podcast. Stay tuned!