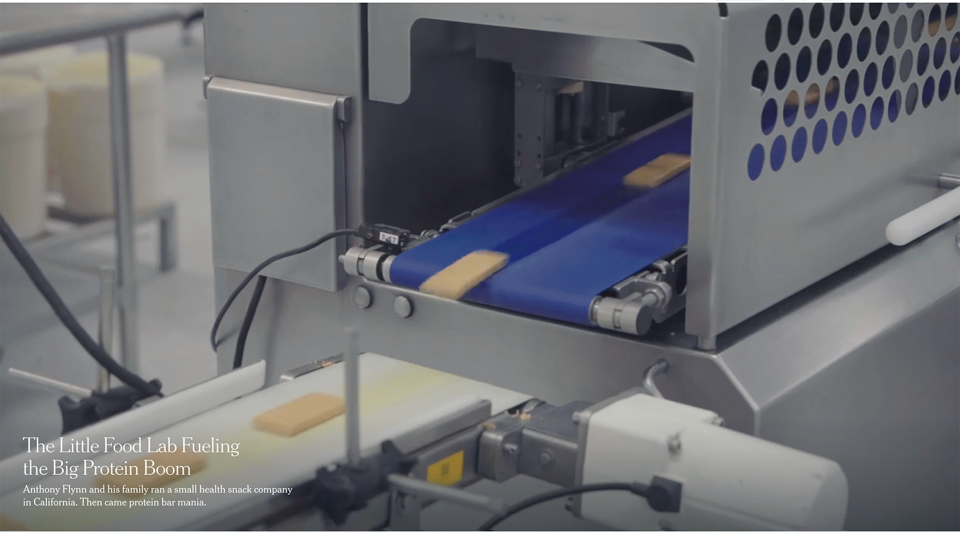

The Little Food Lab Fueling the Big Protein Boom

Anthony Flynn and his family ran a small health snack company in California. Then came protein bar mania.

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By **Mattie Kahn** **Photographs and Video by Jake Michaels**

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Anthony Flynn had already watched a series of food fads rise and fall. His company, YouBar, has long produced snacks for brands that cater to the popular diets of the moment. He dabbled in no-carb bars. He did paleo pastries. When keto had its moment, he tested so many high-fat recipes that he had to place spittoons in his office. (“You can only eat so much coconut oil,” he said.)

Mr. Flynn was agnostic about the trends, though each boosted his business. Sure, he could make date-sweetened granola bites. Yes, he could produce a no-sugar cake pop. But then came protein, the nutrient that prompted him to start his business — and that has recently transformed it.

“It’s just been an insane amount of demand,” said Mr. Flynn, as he walked through YouBar’s headquarters in the San Gabriel Valley of Southern California this spring. “We cannot build lines fast enough.”

Mr. Flynn, 41, started making his own protein bars as a teenager, trading recipes with his mother — a health-conscious and Level Two certified snowboarding instructor — on drives to and from a ski resort outside the Los Angeles neighborhood where he grew up.

After he graduated from college in 2006, he convinced her to turn their kitchen experimentation into a business, spinning up a web-based retailer that he called YouBar. It whipped up bars for CrossFit fans and ultramarathoners and sold them in packs of 12. Customers could choose their base and mix-ins, building the precise bar to meet their nutritional needs.

“I figured if I could make four boxes a day, so 48 bars a day, I wouldn’t have to get a real job,” Mr. Flynn said.

YouBar did better than he expected, catering to a new class of emerging brands and influencers who wanted to sell protein bars directly to their audience, without a middleman. Soon enough, Mr. Flynn had brought on his brother, Dennis Flynn, and his sister, Emily Vencat, who was previously a journalist at Newsweek. She is now YouBar’s chief innovation officer.

The siblings’ personalized approach attracted clients and drove YouBar’s expansion. For much of its first decade, the company stuck to bars, but in 2017, a client wanted to create non-rectangular protein products. YouBar started producing shakes and “functional nut butters.” Baked goods followed. It was good, steady work.

Then, a little less than two years ago, something changed. Requests started to pour in. Dozens per week. Then a hundred. Companies that had been working with YouBar on one or two protein products wanted more of them, ordering thousands of bars at a time, then hundreds of thousands. New brands were clamoring for space on YouBar’s production lines, and their requests became more complex: protein muffins, protein toaster pastries, protein fudge brownies, protein churros.

“It doesn’t matter what it is,” Mr. Flynn said. “People want to put protein in it.”

In the food company YouBar’s “innovation kitchen,” food scientists develop a variety of protein products. “We don’t do frozen,” said Anthony Flynn, the company’s co-founder. “But that’s kind of it.”

Mr. Flynn started making his own protein bars as a teenager. He’s turned that early experimentation into a multi-decade career. “I thought I’d be sick of these things,” he said. “I’m loving it more than ever before.”

The effect of the protein boom on YouBar’s business has been unquestionable. “It’s just been an insane amount of demand,” Mr. Flynn said. “We can’t build lines fast enough.”

Now, almost two decades after YouBar began, it has switched to a 24/7 production schedule, running large industrial-grade machines at all hours. (It once used standard kitchen appliances, complete with lifetime warranties, but the mixers were no match for dense protein powder. YouBar was issued a full refund, on the condition that it stop calling for replacement parts.) Blades that glint under fluorescent lights slice through pea protein isolates, nut butters, cacao nibs, artificial sweeteners and humectants to produce a paste that tastes like a grittier Snickers bar but possesses the nutritional profile of steamed chicken breast.

Chances are you have never heard of YouBar. Its customers are not individuals but brands that hire the company to make their products. Nondisclosure agreements prevent YouBar from making its client list public, but it is filled with familiar names. The 100 or so protein-laden products that come off its lines keep the shelves stocked at airports, gas stations and retailers like Target and Whole Foods. Ms. Vencat estimates — maybe with only slight exaggeration — that “the vast majority of American consumers have eaten something out of our facilities.” She just can’t reveal what.

But inarguably, YouBar’s time has come. For overstretched mothers and their swole sons, for aging men and women fretting about bone loss, protein has become an obsession. The size of the whey protein market alone is now estimated at around $5 billion to $10 billion. To capitalize, food companies are selling protein Cheerios, protein Wheaties, protein PB&Js and a protein bar named for Michelangelo’s David, the creator of which recently closed a $75 million funding round.

The effect of the protein craze on YouBar’s business has been startling. Mr. Flynn declined to give exact numbers but said revenue jumped 85 percent between 2022 and 2024. At a recent YouBar holiday bash, Dennis Flynn announced that the company had manufactured over one billion grams of protein in the previous 12 months.

Mr. Flynn sees protein as a great unifier in the often contentious landscape of American food — not another trend, but a lifestyle.

"You have low-fat communities, and you have high-fat communities, and both are cool with protein," he said. "Protein brings people together."

Willy Wonka and the Protein 'Innovation Kitchen'

Sandwiched between an Amazon depot and a shower door wholesaler, the larger of YouBar's two facilities appears unremarkable from the outside — beige and low-slung, with a respectable number of parking spaces out front.

But inside, the décor is a cross between "Office Space" corp-core and a "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" extravaganza. On one wall, a Golden Ticket sits blown-up and framed. On another, there's a replica of Wonka's purple suit. (Ms. Vencat makes the metaphor plain: "We think of Anthony as the better-for-you Willy Wonka.")

In the center of it all is YouBar's "innovation kitchen," where food scientists churn out samples of in-development products (150, as of this spring). Tubs of ingredients sit on counters — plant and animal protein powders, coconut in all its forms, additives that keep mixtures stable, others that help them retain their intended texture.

The kitchen remains Mr. Flynn's favorite room at YouBar's growing headquarters, and he has made sure that his office is still squeezed next to it and across from the workstations where YouBar's two lead food scientists tinker with formulations.

This practice helps set YouBar apart. While most co-manufacturers (as YouBar is known in the business) just scale up client recipes, YouBar serves as a partner in the development process. Clients come with product prompts that sound like riddles: A protein bar enriched with reishi mushrooms and enrobed in chocolate with under 5 grams of sugar and fewer than 200 calories. A muffin with the macronutrients of an egg-white omelet. Vanilla flavoring powerful enough to mask protein powder's distinct aftertaste.

In 2020, Ashley Nickelsen, the founder of B.T.R. Nation, approached YouBar with her own puzzle: How about a low-sugar bar with simple, pronounceable ingredients? Most protein bars, including dozens that YouBar manufactures, use creative chemical compounds to cut calories and mimic familiar flavors and colors. Ms. Nickelsen wanted real food, wrapped in a cheerful sleeve.

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"Most manufacturers were like, 'No, that can't be done,'" she said. But YouBar was game. The process of sampling, testing and perfecting took over nine months. Her first order with YouBar was for just 15,000 bars. Orders now run into the millions. Her bars are sold in Whole Foods, Costco and airports nationwide.

That kind of rapid success has led Mr. Flynn to keep YouBar's minimum order number at 10,000 bars — smaller than that of some competitors and modest enough so that small brands can work with him. New clients fill out detailed questionnaires to assess their preferences: Natural or artificial flavors? What about sweeteners? Stevia or monk fruit? How about allulose, to recreate the pleasure of a warm cinnamon roll or the decadence of a slice of frosted cake? What about more protein?

YouBar is willing to follow its clients wherever their dreams take them. Almost.

"We don't do frozen," Mr. Flynn said, drawing the line. "But that's kind of it."

Protein Overload?

Protein is responsible for building and repairing tissue and maintaining immune function. According to the latest federal recommendations, adults should consume around a third of a gram of protein per pound of body weight per day. Often without even meaning to, the average American is far exceeding that amount. A person who weighs around 175 pounds could just about meet that goal with some chicken breast and a big scoop of quinoa.

"It is just not a nutrient of concern," said Joanne Slavin, a nutrition professor at the University of Minnesota. "We get tons of it."

But fitness influencers, pop researchers and podcasters like Dr. Peter Attia have claimed that those numbers are far too low. Ms. Vencat summarized the overarching sentiment this way: "'You have to eat one gram of protein per pound of body weight, at least, and that's only if don't want to waste away and die.'" And many such protein evangelists have worked with YouBar, Ms. Vencat said.

But is more protein better? "This is the big question," said Marion Nestle, emerita professor of nutrition at New York University. However, she could not endorse substituting whole, fresh foods with processed bars that come in flavors like pumpkin spice latte. "Everybody would be better off eating food rather than food products," Dr. Nestle said.

Christopher Gardner, a nutrition scientist and professor of medicine at Stanford, added that while there is almost no limit on the amount of fat our bodies can store, protein cannot be endlessly stockpiled in cells. The extra protein a person eats from those bars gets turned into carbs or fat, Dr. Gardner said.

Protein "is not in your liver or your spleen or your big toe or your elbow, waiting to be used tomorrow," he said. "So I'm bewildered. The trend confuses me."

Dr. Gardner is waiting for Americans to move on, but YouBar would like them not to. To keep the masses enticed, Mr. Flynn is pushing the limits of the protein status quo. His latest obsession? Protein consumption as an elevated eating experience. Not filet mignon, but a product with a filling that oozes or a decadent coating. "A single extruded bar? Fantastic stuff," he said. "But what if after someone receives it, they can throw it in the freezer, throw it in the microwave, add water, and all of a sudden this thing comes alive?"

"I thought I'd be sick of these things," he said. "I'm loving it more than ever before."

Ms. Vencat can attest to that. Recently, when a set of top-secret samples went missing from the test kitchen, she asked YouBar's IT team to review their security cameras. Recipe developers had been working on a promising doughnut recipe. Ms. Vencat wanted the perpetrator apprehended.

There was no heist, as it turned out. The footage showed Mr. Flynn, "walking in and out of the kitchen, eating them," she said. She scolded him about the snacking, but he didn't feel too bad.

"Thankfully," she said, "they were really high in protein."