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For Athletes Who Don't Savor Sweets, How About a Squeeze of Pizza?

Products Power Workouts in Flavors Like Hickory, Thai Chili; Sick of Vanilla Gel



Typically sweet energy bars and gels are now being made in savory flavors like pizza and barbecue. Photo illustration: Rob Alcaraz

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The dream of the endurance athlete with the soul of the junk-food addict is reality: Athletes can now sustain themselves on energy bars and gels that taste like french fries, barbecue and even pizza.

Energy-food entrepreneurs have listened to athletes who prefer savory flavors to sweets for an extra boost while exercising.



Honey Smoked BBQ
Kind bar

Clif Bar plans to unveil a line of individually packaged energy gels in February flavored like pizza and sweet potato french fries. This past summer, New York-based Kind snacks released five savory energy bars—honey smoked barbecue, hickory, Thai chili, honey mustard and roasted jalapeño—after two years of product testing.

“You’re seeing a lot of active people reaching for a bag of chips or beef jerky,” says John Lesser, brand director at Kind Snacks.

The energy bar has become a staple for active Americans. PowerBars, Clif Bars and other energy products are made from easily digested carbohydrates and proteins, which deliver fast energy to athletes. In recent years, the products have also been marketed as a healthy alternative to vending-machine snacks or a convenient meal replacement for dieters.



Laura McDonald at the EPIC bar packaging facility in Round Rock, Texas, prepares Berry Blossom Hunter & Gatherer trail mix PHOTO: ILANA PANICHLINSMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“There has been this shift, and athletes want more neutral to savory flavors, and that presents a real challenge,” Mr. Randall says. “Sometimes the blends just don’t taste good.”

Smaller, regional companies have driven the savory movement by mixing natural flavors with nontraditional base ingredients, like vegetables and even meat.

While training for an Ironman triathlon in 2012, Texans Taylor Collins and Katie Forrest developed the EPIC bar, which contain buffalo, turkey and lamb meat. In December 2013, Californian Danny Grossman launched the SLOW Bar, which features flavors like curry, Thai chili and Moroccan spice.

Mr. Grossman says he sidestepped the traditional sweet flavor challenges by creating his bars from dehydrated vegetables and bland tapioca syrup. Marguerette Dau, who launched the Chicago-based Journey Bar in 2009, uses flax seed and buckwheat to create her pizza- and coconut curry-flavored bars. Ms. Dau says she decided to produce her own bar because she was sick of “eating candy bars” every time she wanted to exercise.

Brent Ruby, whose Montana-based Omnibars are made from grass-fed beef and potatoes, says he ate sweet bars and gels for more than a decade, and one day simply burned out.

“I couldn’t eat one more vanilla gel—I was just done,” says Dr. Ruby, who says he has finished multiple Ironman events. “If you only make sweets, people are eventually going to get tired of it.”

Perfecting the savory flavors requires months and sometimes years of development. Many of the entrepreneurs hit a wall along the way. Ms. Dau scrapped her wasabi ginger bar and Dr. Ruby decided against selling a balsamic fig bar. Mr. Grossman has yet to sell his French cuisine bar, which features notes of leeks, lentils, onions and Gruyere cheese.

“We’re committed to cracking the code,” Mr. Grossman says.

Even the finished products don’t always win a consumer’s taste buds. Dr. Ruby likens his products to artisanal sour beers, which often require multiple tastings before people acquire the taste. Ms. Dau performs tastings at area running events and farmers markets, and says she asks consumers to try her bars more than once.



Packages of EPIC Hunter Gatherer beef jerky and berry blossom mix. PHOTO: ILANA PANICHLINSMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“The first time they try it, they crinkle their nose because they can’t get around the fact that they popped a bar in their mouth and it tastes like pizza,” Ms. Dau says. “Once they have a few pieces, they realize it’s something they can eat.”

Citing these challenges and its own consumer research, PowerBar has not developed any savory products. Eric Zaltes, general manager for PowerBar, in Berkeley, Calif., says he has had complaints from ultramarathoners

regarding sweet products. But the majority of consumers, Mr. Zaltes says, are fine with the traditional flavors.

Mr. Zaltes says he believes the current food science has yet to produce a savory bar worthy of mass consumption.

“There are a few small players that have made some inroads,” Mr. Zaltes says. “But we haven’t found any [savory products] that actually taste good.”

Mr. Grossman insists that the new bars taste fine, but some manufacturers simply equate “good” tastes with sweet flavors. “Our savory flavors remind them of a meal, and not dessert,” he says.

Mr. Zaltos says the energy-bar market has a history of adjusting to popular food trends, such as the Atkins diet and the organic and locally sourced movements. But as these fads fade, Mr. Zaltos says, the energy bars and gels revert to their core flavors and recipes.

Dr. Ruby disagrees. He trained for his first Ironman triathlon in 1986. He says that during his training, he tried the original chocolate PowerBar. His first impression wasn't positive. He and many others eventually adjusted to the taste.

"I just remember thinking, 'This is sick. Who is going to eat this thing?'" he says.

Despite these advances, some athletes continue to hold out for more. During his weekly 100-mile bicycle rides through greater Chicago, Ironman triathlete Gregory Saul eats actual potato chips, beef jerky and the occasional hot dog. Mr. Saul, 26, rarely eats energy bars or gels.

"To this day, I still gag when I eat energy gels," says Mr. Saul, a digital advertising salesman. "I'd rather eat the foods I want, like a pizza and hot dogs."



Epic Bar co-founder Taylor Collins said he is confident that endurance athletes will acquire a taste for his meat flavored bar, which includes buffalo, turkey and lamb. PHOTO: ILANA PANICH-LINSMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL