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Freeze Frame: 3 Companies That Make Healthy and Tasty Frozen Meals

Despite being a \$44 billion industry, frozen meals have endured a bit of an image problem in recent years. Surveys show that shoppers increasingly view frozen foods as highly processed and perhaps not very tasty. But that trend is changing, spurred by innovations in the natural and organic packaged frozen prepared foods category and consumers' desire for healthy meals easily prepared at home.

Natural and organic frozen prepared foods grew about 10 percent from 2011 to 2012, notes Carlotta Mast, editor-in-chief of NewHope360.com at New Hope Natural

Media, a media resource and information provider for the natural, organic and healthy-lifestyle products industry. In fact, that segment of the frozen prepared meals market now totals \$1.5 billion.

"There's definitely new product development," Mast says. "It's building off this idea that taste is the most important factor. For a long time natural and organic frozen prepared meals had a reputation of not tasting very good. That's not the reality anymore."

Manufacturers of frozen, healthy meals are increasingly reaching out to consumers to alter the perceptions about their foods. For instance, ConAgra brands [Marie Callender's](#) and [Healthy Choice](#) just teamed up to produce a [video](#) touting the freshness and quality of frozen meals, which avoid processed ingredients and use vegetables picked at the peak of the growing season. Many manufacturers are using sophisticated freezing techniques to preserve taste and quality.



LYFE Kitchen entrees heat in bags instead of the usual microwave tray.

Phil Lempert, aka the [Supermarket Guru](#), put frozen meals in his [Top Ten Food Trends in 2013](#) list because of the convenience and the portion size. Data from the Hartman Group shows about 44 percent of adults eat alone and that Americans increasingly want to avoid food waste, making frozen meals an appealing option. Frozen breakfast options also are becoming more popular, as more people are aware of the importance of the first meal of the day.

Following are three *VIVmag* picks for companies making natural or organic meals, hoping to change the perception and flavor of frozen foods.

LYFE Kitchen is new to the healthy frozen foods market, announcing its frozen meal offerings last month during the Natural Products Expo in Anaheim, CA. LYFE also is in the midst of opening a chain of healthy, fast-casual restaurants, with two California locations so far and plans for nationwide expansion.

LYFE was founded by investment banker Steve Sidwell. After struggling to lose weight, he hired a personal chef who made nutritious, tasty meals. Sidwell lost 30 pounds in three months. "It was the easiest thing I've ever done because the food tasted good," Sidwell says. "I thought: Why in the world can't I buy this food in a restaurant?"

He thinks that people would eat healthier if healthy food tasted better. "The No. 1 myth is 'healthy' doesn't taste good," he says. "That's the resistance people have."

The prepared meals — which include breakfast options such as Oat Bran and Ricotta Pancakes and Farmer's Market Frittata to dinner entrees such as Whole Grain Penne Pasta and Orange Mango Chicken — range from \$4.99–\$6.99 per serving. The options are also cooked in a bag, instead of the typical tray, for a fresher taste.

As for nutrition, the Chicken Chili Verde with polenta and black beans, for example, has 320 calories and is packed with protein (27 grams) and fiber (6 grams). While frozen meals often are high in sodium, LYFE's sodium content ranges from about 120 milligrams (5 percent Daily Value) in the Steel-Cut Oatmeal to 470 mg (20 percent DV) in the Nine Grain Pilaf.

Cedarlane Natural Foods, founded in 1981 in Venice, CA, has been making healthy frozen fare long before many of its competitors. The company uses organic and farm-fresh ingredients to make meals that, they say, "would make Grandma proud."

The selections range from entrees to appetizers and breakfast meals with ingredients such as fire-roasted tomatoes, organic black beans, basmati rice, nonfat mozzarella and organic unbleached wheat flour. The meals carry the Quality Assurance International Organic Certification.

Last year, the company launched **CedarLEAN** egg-white frittatas, including the Broccoli and Cheddar Egg White Frittata flavored with Dijon mustard in a scalloped potato crust, containing 13 grams of protein and 5 grams of fiber at 180 calories. There's also a Roasted Chile and Cheese option, as well as Spinach and Roasted Tomato. The lean line also offers soup and wrap lunch combos, such as butternut squash paired with a quinoa wrap, minestrone soup with a Mediterranean wrap and lentil vegetable soup with a samosa wrap — all at under 230 calories.

EVOL has staked its claim in the healthy, frozen foods category by emphasizing easy, on-the-go items such as burritos, pizzas and flatbreads. The company was founded in 2009 by Brendan Synnott and Tom Spier, founders of Bear Naked Granola, along with Phil Anson of Phil's Fresh Foods, who had been selling his homemade burritos out of a cooler to fellow climbers in Colorado's Eldorado Canyon for 10 years.

EVOL (love backwards) offers a range of burritos (260–400 calories each), including Chicken Fajita with guacamole, Gluten Free Shredded Beef and Spicy Steak. The company has also expanded with all-natural meals such as Truffle Parmesan Mac & Cheese, Chicken Enchilada Bake and Chicken, Spinach & Ricotta Pizza.

The company describes all-natural as no artificial flavors, colors, additives, preservatives or fillers; chicken, beef, pork, eggs and cheese raised on a 100 percent vegetarian diet without antibiotics and hormones; cheese free of rBGH; and non-GMO grains, vegetables and oils.

EVOL pays close attention to taste and has a **Ways to Cook** web page to urge customers to cook the burritos, wraps or flatbreads certain ways to enhance the flavor. (The page devoted to flatbread cooking methods even includes a "wine pairings" list.)