



What's New in the Frozen-Food Aisle

BY JAYNE HURLEY & BONNIE LIEBMAN

The frozen-food aisle isn't what it used to be. Sure, you'll still find the familiar stacks of boxed "healthy" entrees and meals from Lean Cuisine, President's Choice Blue Menu, and Compliments Balance. Most have barely enough food for dieters or your Aunt Sadie (you know, the one who eats like a bird). But with at least 500 or 600 milligrams—a third of a day's worth—of sodium, they sure don't skimp in the salt department (though they're lower than the 700 to 1,000 mg of sodium you'd get in a typical Stouffer's or Michelina's).

What's new? Alongside the single-serve boxes are a growing number of frozen meals in multi-serve bags. They're still salty, but you can cut the salt—and create a healthier meal—by adding your own fresh or frozen vegetables.

Here's a sampling of frozen entrees or meals that hover around 450 mg of sodium... and some fixer-uppers that drop below 450 mg—in fact, the sodium gets cut more or less in half—if you add a similar-sized bag of veggies.

Information compiled by Namita Davis in Toronto, with help from Neera Chaudhary.

Take No Sides

"Red bell peppers, carrots and grilled eggplant with bulgur and whole grain red quinoa in a Moroccan-inspired sauce with chick peas and raisins." Clearly, this isn't your mother's Lean Cuisine.

In fact, if you ask President's Choice, its Blue Menu Bulgur and Quinoa with Chick Peas—a perfect mix of crisp and nutty and cumin-infused sweet—is just a side dish. But you can turn it into an entree in less than a minute. Just add a (398 mL) can of Eden Organic No Salt Added Garbanzo Beans (chick peas) to the (600-gram) bag of bulgur and quinoa. Presto! Instead of 720 milligrams of sodium per cup, you're down to around 450 mg. And it comes with a respectable 12 grams of protein and 9 grams of fibre.

Another winner: Blue Menu Orzo with Beans and Goat Cheese. We added a can of Eden Organic No Salt Added Great Northern Beans to bring the sodium down from 380 mg per cup to 260 mg. The aromatic blend of red and yellow bell peppers, spinach, and tangy goat cheese makes the dish easy to stretch. Too bad the orzo is white.



Steam Heat

"Our Unique Duo Tray Steam-cooker allows the ingredients to cook separately from the sauce to lock in fresh flavours and to deliver crispy vegetables and meats that are always tender," says the Healthy Choice Gourmet Steamers package.

Got that right.

Nearly all of the dozen Gourmet Steamers offer crisper vegetables and more tender chicken than other frozen dinner lines. And they're delicious. (Exceptions: We couldn't detect a hint of lemon or garlic in the Lemon Garlic Chicken & Shrimp. And the Sweet Sesame Chicken was too sweet.)

The Gourmet Steamers' calories are around 300, the saturated fat never tops 2 grams, and the sodium (330 mg to 700 mg) is less than you'd get in most 300-calorie entrees. Plus, four of the entrees rely on at least some whole grains.

Take the Mediterranean Grilled Chicken, "with whole grain pasta and vegetables in a wine & balsamic garlic sauce." The sodium (540 mg) is higher than our 450 mg target, but it's lower than most other frozen entrees. You'd never know that whole wheat flour was the first ingredient in the pasta. And the sauce? Tastes homemade.

We also loved the Thai Curry Chicken and the Mediterranean Grilled Vegetables, which deliver 5 or 7 grams of fibre without inulin or other isolated fibres.

Could they use extra veggies? Sure. So toss yourself a mixed green salad and you're in business.





No-Skill Skillet

One look at the Nutrition Facts on Stouffer's Thai Shrimp Sauté Sensations skillet meal and you may keep walking. Who can afford 700 mg of sodium—almost half a day's worth—in each 320-gram serving?

Best solution: make your own sauté.
Second-best solution: add vegetables.

We added a 400-gram bag of frozen no-salt-added stir-fry vegetables to the 640-gram bag of Thai Shrimp (though you could easily add fresh broccoli, asparagus, or other veggies).

Just like that, the sodium dropped from 700 mg to about 450 mg per serving (or 370 mg per cup). Bonus: the potassium in the added vegetables helps counter the blood-pressure boost from the excess salt.

There was plenty of ginger-citrus-with-a-mild-kick sauce to go around. What's more, the sauce went around whole grain brown rice, which cooked up nice and nutty.

Unfortunately, Stouffer's uses white rice, white pasta, or white potatoes in its seven other Sauté Sensations. Some (like the Chicken Alfredo and Mediterranean Chicken) may be too bland with added veggies, while others (like the Shrimp Alfredo and Grilled Chicken Teriyaki) still have enough oomph. You'll have to rely on your own taste buds to be sure.

Of course, you could just skip the Stouffer's and whip up your own Thai or Teriyaki or Alfredo sauce. But that's another story.



Pesto vs. Parmesan

President's Choice Blue Menu Parmesan Chicken has less sodium (460 mg) than most frozen entrees. (Michelin's Signature Chicken Parmigiano has 760 mg.) Unfortunately, like most Blue Menu frozen meals, it's made with white pasta (or rice).

Blue Menu 100% whole wheat rotini with Chicken Pesto, on the other hand, has the right kind of pasta but has more sodium (670 mg). And while both Blue Menu meals are delish, the Chicken Pesto is in a class of its own. The garlicky pesto is perfect, and if you hadn't read the package, you'd never know that the pasta was 100 per cent whole wheat.

Thanks, Mr. (or is it Ms.?) Prez, for at least trying to cut the sodium and for using whole grains. But is it too much to ask for both in the same dish?

It's not just these two. Blue Menu 100% whole wheat penne with Roasted Vegetables has 750 mg of sodium. And Blue Menu Barley Risotto with Herbed Chicken mixes whole-grain barley with brown and wild rice, but it hits 800 mg of sodium. That's no higher than many frozen entrees that are made with refined grains, but it's still half a day's worth.

Perhaps Blue Menu's chefs could work a tad harder to keep a lid on sodium. And while they're at it, how about some extra veggies?

Keep it Lean

If you're a waist-watcher in the market for lower-calorie frozen entrees, odds are you already know Lean Cuisine. Most of its Sélections and Spa lines keep their calories under 300 and their sodium in the 500s. And Spa, to its credit, uses whole grains.



Unfortunately, except for the lemon grass & ginger spiced Thai Chicken, Spa didn't wow our taste buds. We had better luck with Sélections like the Chicken à l'Orange. Its "roasted chicken tenderloins in a subtle citrus sauce with red pepper, broccoli, tender carrots and whole grain rice" is colourful and veggie-rich.

And unlike some other lower-sodium entrees (it clocks in at 430 mg), the Chicken à l'Orange isn't too sweet. The other Sélections entrees that include whole grains—Honey Mustard Chicken and Glazed Chicken—have at least 600 mg of sodium.

Too bad the Chicken Fettuccine isn't whole grain. Its creamy Alfredo sauce tastes like full-fat, yet it has just 300 calories and 2 grams of saturated fat flavoured with 540 mg of sodium. (That's not low-sodium, but Michelin's "healthy" Harmony Chicken Fettuccine Alfredo, while just as low in sat fat, hits 820 mg of sodium.)

'Nuf said. 🍌

Indian Lifeline

Live near a Whole Foods, Planet Organic, IGA, Safeway, or Save-on? Then check out Indian Life's line of five frozen meals.

They're not skimpy like Lean Cuisine. Each entree has 340 to 470 calories, so they can satisfy appetites that think of 200 calories as a snack. And their saturated fat never exceeds 2½ grams because they're made with canola oil instead of traditional butter or ghee.

What's more, the sodium ranges from 450 mg to 600 mg, and it's not that low-for-frozen-food just because Indian spices are so flavourful. Take the Mattar Paneer (spicy green peas, cubes of paneer cheese, brown basmati rice, and naan). Its sodium (470 mg) is a far cry from Amy's version (780 mg).

And you'll be so taken by the authentic flavour that you won't notice that you're getting 7 grams of fibre, some of it from whole grain brown basmati rice. Too bad the Mattar Paneer comes with white-flour naan instead of the 100% whole wheat chapati that's available with some of Indian Life's other meals.

We also loved the onion-garlic-ginger-chili-cilantro complexity of the Dal-Mung Bean, the rich and creamy Vegetable Korma, and the curried Bombay Garbanzo (with its whole wheat chapati). Mmmm.

