



Q&A Almonds

Powering Plant-Based Snacking with California Almonds

When it comes to plant-based snacking, product developers are just getting started. According to Innova Market Insights, plant-based claims for global food and beverage launches are experiencing strong growth with a compound annual growth rate of 57% over the 2015 to 2019 period.

As a result of such growth, snack brands are wondering how to remain relevant—and deliver more healthful appeal—in an increasingly crowded category. Chef Christine Farkas, Innovation Lead and Founder, IHeartFood Consulting, says to let almonds inspire innovation.

“Almonds are such incredible foundations for plant-based snacking,” she says. “With so many ingredient formats, textures, flavors— and the 6 grams of healthy plant-based protein per serving that consumers want— they make exploring plant-based snack opportunities really exciting.”

To get a taste of Chef Farkas’s own plant-based snacking explorations, the Almond Board of California (ABC) took a peek into her kitchen.



with
CHEF CHRISTINE FARKAS

Innovation Lead and Founder,
IHeartFood Consulting

ABC: To start, the fact that we’re using terms like “plant-based” rather than “meatless,” “vegan” or even “vegetarian” says a lot about the category’s expansion and its evolution. What does that term tell you about how the category has grown?

CHEF CHRISTINE: To me, “plant-based” conveys a refreshing openness and richness that you now see in this category. Moving in a plant-based direction lets consumers dive into all the emerging ingredients out there, and instead of being just a “diet,” it creates new culinary adventures that enhance our lives nutritionally and experientially. We’re gaining options, not losing them.

Consumers used to feel that by focusing on plant-based foods— even for positive reasons— they’d inevitably have to miss out on some of life’s tastiness, as I like to call it. And food is such a big part of our lives— nourishing us, giving us energy, bringing us together as a community— that no one wants to feel like they’re missing out, right? So, it’s encouraging to see so many plant-based options available today with no need to sacrifice anything— not taste, texture or variety, and certainly not nutrition.

The plant-based movement is starting a conversation that can lead to lifestyle change and that has real longevity.

ABC: *Taste, texture, variety, nutrition— are these the qualities consumers want from plant-based choices?*

ABC: *With all of those considerations in mind, where do almonds fit into the equation?*

ABC: *Snacks are a plant-based bright spot. Any comments on why plant-based snacking has flourished— and why almonds inspire such snacking creativity?*

ABC: *What do you, as a food professional, enjoy about formulating plant-based snacks with almonds?*

ABC: *There are 14 different almond ingredient formats at last count. Which are your favorites from a functionality and formulation standpoint?*

CHEF CHRISTINE: Absolutely. Consumers' goals for plant-based eating are all over the map, which is interesting to see and we can learn a lot from, in my opinion.

When I talk to consumers, they bring up topics like clean labels and healthy halos, and they see plant-based foods as tools in their kits for delivering health and vitality.

That said, what interests and excites them is also part of the picture, and today's plant-based foods need to generate excitement and inspire a sense of adventure, letting people enjoy those intriguing tastes and cuisines.

CHEF CHRISTINE: Almonds play a substantial role in satisfying those needs.

Just look at all the alt-dairy products in the market. Almonds really helped pioneer that category: almond milk, yogurts, cheeses, alternative spreads, even indulgent desserts. But you also see almonds and almond ingredients in blended burgers and sauces— and especially in snacks.

CHEF CHRISTINE: Full disclosure: I love snacking. And as a snacker and snack developer, I know from experience that the snack space has an incredible impact on how we move through our days.

I think this category is a creative hotspot because we snack in many different ways every day. We snack for wellness— to get a quick burst of energy or a “pocket” of nutrition when we need it most. And we also snack for convenience, because a grab-and-go package of seasoned nut clusters or a single-serve energy bar is a lot easier to eat than a full meal.

And there are plenty of creative ways that almond ingredients help snackers meet all those needs. They're nutritional powerhouses that we can transform into a range of formats that ward off hunger and keep you going between meals, workouts, meetings— all the good stuff in life.

CHEF CHRISTINE: Working in the innovation space, the first thing I'd say is that almonds are versatile and inspiring in culinary applications for their sensory benefits: the textures, flavors, formats. These are all incredible draws. You can explore sweet and savory profiles and dive into nearly every category and cuisine.

CHEF CHRISTINE: Fourteen and counting — that is a lot, and they're all fascinating to explore as a chef and developer. Almonds in their whole form, and in formats like slices and slivers and diced, give texture, bite and flavor to snacks — and that flavor is enhanced even more when you roast the ingredients to bring out those nutty notes.

Almond milk and butter are highly functional in bringing taste, texture and nutrition to applications— I'm thinking sauces and alt-dairy ice creams, for starters— where we'd never experienced almonds this way before.

But it's defatted almond protein powder that I've been exploring lately, especially in bars and bites.

ABC: *Why is defatted almond flour, also known as almond protein powder, so fun to work with?*

ABC: *We know that some plant proteins are low or missing one or more of the amino acids necessary to qualify as a “complete protein.” How do you formulate with almonds and other plant proteins to complete the picture?*

ABC: *Rich and innovative: both key qualities. But if you were to choose three more key qualities that plant-based snacks need to succeed today, what would they be— and how do almonds deliver them?*

CHEF CHRISTINE: What I love most about almond protein powder is that it’s a very neutral ingredient, so it blends well into a range of applications.

But what’s also interesting is that it has a slightly nutty, almost sweet-almond profile that’s not as distinctive as some other plant proteins, but that adds just a hint of appealing flavor to whatever it’s in— sweet or savory— while still letting other ingredients shine.

I’m trialing it in **beverages** and **bars**, and the fact that it’s easy to work with as an ingredient and blends smoothly into the applications is great, too. It makes bars chewy and beverages lush, with none of the chalky mouthfeel that some plant proteins have. I’ve tested it in a few different concepts and it’s been a really enjoyable ingredient to incorporate.

CHEF CHRISTINE: In beverages and bars I’m really diving deep into the complementary protein equation, looking for where we can pair almonds and almond protein powder with, for example, proteins and flours from pulses like peas, chickpeas and beans to build a more complete protein for consumers who want that from their plant-based snacks.

And blending all these ingredients has been an interesting exploration. On the bar side, I’ve combined ground almonds and almond protein powder with pea protein, using fruit paste as a binder. And in beverages, I’m working with almond protein powder, almond milk and purees— chickpea, fruit— to make blended plant-protein smoothies that are rich and innovative.

CHEF CHRISTINE:

- ✓ First, they have to be delicious. They have to meet or exceed sensory expectations and give consumers that sense of enjoyment so that the snacks draw them back time and again. And almonds deliver that. They have the flavor, texture and format variety to keep consumers engaged.
- ✓ Of course, nutrition is also important— maybe even tied with delicious for first. So we’re talking about clean labels, ingredients that consumers feel good about putting in their and their kids’ bodies and nutrients like protein, fiber and vitamin E that make a snack really good for you. And again, almonds check off all those boxes, making for an incredibly nutritious snack build.
- ✓ And because these are snacks, designing convenience into the package so that consumers can just grab them and go is essential. We know that almonds fit into so many convenient snack formats, as we’ve discussed above.

So if you lock in convenience, sensory, and nutrition, you’re creating a high-impact framework for innovation. And that’s what almonds do. They make plant-based snacking easy for consumers, fun and completely satisfying.