


GOING TO EXTREMES

 Variety is the spice of life, and some meat snack companies are taking that old adage to the extreme with off-the-cuff flavors, exotic meats and even amped-up energy meat sticks. And meat snack connoisseurs are eating them up, so to speak.

Take Bacon Freak Gourmet Bacon Club, distributed by Coastal Vineyards Inc., a purveyor of gourmet and wine gifts based in Moorpark, Calif.

Last November, the club unveiled a line of Bacon Jerky with six flavors, including Summer Tomato BLT and Honey BBQ, on its Web site. "It certainly has a following," says founder and owner Rocco Loosbrock.

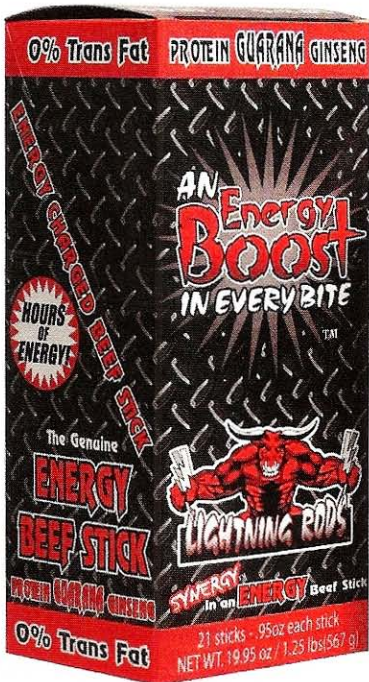
And that buzz can be polarizing at times. "People either love it or think it's disgusting and spit it out," Loosbrock explains, citing its chewy texture as a main gustatory hurdle for some.

Some companies are going for more exotic options. Jerky.com, a Wichita Falls, Texas-based online jerky retailer, offers alligator, ostrich and elk under its proprietary brand. And Lebanon, Pa.-based Choo Choo R Snacks offers Big Buffalo Ole Smokies meat sticks and Venison Jerky.

Another item being distributed by Choo Choo R is the Lightning Rod, created by Sartell, Minn.-based Power Hungry Foods. The meat stick, which hit the marketplace in March, is infused with guarana and ginseng to provide a high-energy kick that lasts for five hours or more.

"Early consumers have all been receptive to it," says Jimmy Hawkins, vice president of sales and marketing, who co-founded Power Hungry Foods with President Greg Bearson. "We now have about three to four famous pro athletes who are regular users of the product."

So what's driving consumers to demand new products that push the flavor envelope? "I think people fancy themselves as jerky gourmets," says Pat Sherburne, Choo Choo R president and sales manager. "You have to add new items to keep people interested."



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