



(Photo courtesy of Power Hungry Foods)

Jerky with juice

Is the market ready for meat snacks that pack a punch?

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A new line of meat snacks introduced this past month put a caffeinated spotlight on an ingredient trend that has evolved from the beverage industry. Vigor-promising claims are now being used to market a variety of beef jerky products that are fortified with a dose of energy. Perky Jerky, one of the latest of these new breeds of “performance-enhanced” beef jerky products is now appearing in mountain and ski shops, convenience stores and in impulse-buy counters at check-out registers.

“If I had my way, you’ll find Perky Jerky anywhere you find anything,” deadpans Brian Levin, the product’s co-discoverer and the company’s founder and president. He and a friend stumbled upon the wonders of juiced beef jerky one morning on a ski slope when they found that the beef jerky they had brought along had somehow marinated all night in an open container of an energy drink. “Much to their delight, the jerky had retained its original flavor, but had been made more tender by the accident. What’s more, as they floated their way down the mountain through bottomless powder, they realized they’d been given an extra boost – the jerky had taken on some of the pep of the energy drink,” states the company’s Web site. “On the next lift ride up, the greatest innovation in jerky since cracked pepper was born.”

Stress, speed and USDA

Lightning Rods, the enhanced jerky marketed by Power Hungry Foods in Minnesota, did not come from a happy accident but is the result of careful R&D: getting Lightning Rods right required two years and more than 30 recipes. “We tried 20 different ingredients,” says Rody Hawkins, founder of RDI Foods, a product development consultancy that created the recipe and process for Lightning Rods. “We finally found two, ginseng and guarana, that had the properties

we wanted and also made a nice-flavored product.” Asian ginseng is an “adaptogen” reputed to reduce the effects of stress on the human body, and guarana, which is derived from a Brazilian berry, contains caffeine.

“Getting it through USDA was an interesting process,” Hawkins adds. “We had to go to them several times to explain what we were doing and how. They were originally going to reject it out of hand – they wouldn’t approve the word ‘energy’ for a label. We asked about ‘synergy,’ which means things working together, and eventually that was approved.”

“I’m sure there was a lot of head-scratching” at USDA, adds Jim Hawkins (no relation), chief operating officer and vice president of sales and marketing for Power Hungry Foods. “USDA wanted to go by the book.”

Brian Levin also found some resistance at the department when seeking approval for his Perky Jerky. After the accidental discovery of the effects of caffeinated beef jerky, he says he

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“spent the next three years making USDA happy” with the formulation and labeling for Perky Jerky.

While label-approvers at USDA may still consider enhanced jerky to be a novelty, the category actually has a long history. For centuries, Native Americans added berries and nuts to dried meats to create pemmican (the name comes from a Cree word, “pimihkan”), a blend of protein, fat and carbohydrates that provided essential nutrients to sustain energy during long hunts and migrations. And flavored jerky is as old as jerky itself.

“We decided the market didn’t really need another teriyaki stick,” comments Jim Hawkins. “We wondered,

‘what if we had a meat stick that had some health benefits and that gave a little extra energy?’” He says the most difficult part of developing Lightning Rods was “giving significant delivery

“We decided the market didn’t really need another teriyaki stick.”

on the promises of good taste, portion size and the price point. To say it was quite a balancing act would be an understatement.”

Creating “mystique”

Both Perky Jerky and Lightning Rods are co-packed under proprietary agreements. Levin, with a background in the spirits business – he helped build the U.S. market for Jagermeister, the German liqueur, and Gray Goose vodka – admits he knew nothing about the meat industry before he took that first fateful bite of drink-drenched jerky. Both Jim and Rody Hawkins have meat backgrounds – Rody was an executive in the Slim Jim division of Goodmark Foods – but Power Hungry Foods is basically a marketing entity, as is Perky Jerky.

“I learned that you’ve got to create a mystique around a brand, and that’s what we’re trying to do with Perky Jerky,” Levin says, remaining elusive about which parts of the Perky Jerky Web site are true and which are, well, mystique. (Example: The endorsement of Perky Jerky from someone named “Tony Pigford,” who calls himself a “professional down suit model,” which reads, “I find myself on road trips slamming an energy drink and grubbing on some beef jerky pretty often. Now I don’t have to mess with the energy drink. I have all I need in Perky Jerky!”)

Inspired by Paul Newman’s business model, Levin contributes a

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portion of Perky Jerky's profits to two organizations, the National Down Syndrome Society and

the Parent Project Muscular Dystrophy, which focuses on Duchenne Disease. One of Levin's three children has Duchenne, another has MD. "There's definitely a big gap in what needs to be done to combat these diseases," he comments. "We're just trying to do our part."

The marketing icon for Lightning Rods is literally a creature of myth:



"I wouldn't recommend living on this stuff, but for a day it gives great energy."

a minotaur, which in Greek mythology had the head of a bull and the body of a man and lived within the great labyrinth at Knossos in Crete. "The minotaur had an insatiable hunger and was extremely strong – the visual is of strength and power, which speaks for itself," says Jim Hawkins. "Plus there's the labyrinth thing, which is kind of like the lab-

yrinth everything goes though in life. We wanted to bring all of that to the product."

But does a "performance-enhanced" meat product actually enhance performance? Rody Hawkins is a believer. "I was driving from North Carolina to Texas over Christmas last year, and we drove all night, finally reaching Tyler, Texas, at 5 a.m.," he recalls. "So I tried a stick, and then I drove through Dallas in rush-hour traffic – wide awake and singing songs." He pauses. "I wouldn't recommend living on this stuff, but for a day it gives great energy." ■

Steve Bjerklie is M&P's East Coast correspondent based in Franconia, N.H. He has worked as a journalist covering the meat and poultry processing industry for more than 25 years.

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