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GRAIN OF TRUTH

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People are starting to recognize the importance of getting more whole grains in their diet, but many still don't know what they are or how to identify them on packaging.

"Made with whole grain," along with "low in fat," headed the list of nutritional claims people seek, according to a recent consumer study by Opinion Dynamics Corp. in Cambridge, Mass. Indeed, brown rice, bread and pasta sales have started to recover as the low-carb craze that preached carb denial has waned.

There are more products to choose from now. In 2004, 478 new whole-grain products were introduced in U.S. supermarkets, up from 221 the year before, according to Mintel International Group, Chicago. In the first half of this year, 255 new items hit the market.

Still, many consumers aren't eating as much whole grain as they think, said Cynthia Harriman, director of food and nutrition strategies for Oldways Preservation Trust, the Boston-based food-issues think tank that created the Whole Grains Council and the whole grain stamps that are increasingly appearing on food packages.

"THERE'S A REAL GAP IN CONSUMERS' UNDERSTANDING OF WHOLE GRAINS," SHE SAID.

To educate about and promote whole-grain consumption, supermarkets have launched consumer-education programs that use radio ads, shelf signs, online sites and newsletters.

To see how they're doing, SN sent three reporters to three geographically diverse stores in October. We chose three that had nutritionists/dietitians who were accessible to the public, in person or by phone or e-mail.

Posing as undercover shoppers, the reporters evaluated the stores in terms of their knowledge, merchandising, promotion and educational efforts of and around whole grains. We asked the expert or in-store associate why whole grains are important, how much we should be eating, how to read labels for whole-grain content and how to find whole-grain products in the store. We also visited stores to see how plentiful those products were and how easily they were found.

We found associates for the most part to be helpful and knowledgeable. In-store literature and signage were sparse, though, as retailers tended to let products speak for themselves.

KING KULLEN, BETHPAGE, N.Y.

COMMACK, N.Y. -- King Kullen Grocery made whole grains easy to find at a unit here, thanks to its store-within-a-store merchandising approach and a helpful registered dietitian.

The 49-store, family-owned retailer's dietitian is accessible via a toll-free consumer hotline from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays. Dietitian Layne Lieberman was available when SN called three weeks ago. In addition to answering questions, she also referred SN to the King Kullen nutrition newsletter, the government's new food pyramid and other information sources.

Lieberman explained that whole grains are packed with fiber, which helps prevent certain cancers, heart disease and other ailments, and noted that they're high in iron, B vitamins and trace minerals.

The food pyramid recommends that an adult female get at least six daily servings of grains, three of which should be whole grains. SN asked Lieberman to define a serving size. She said it typically represents a half-cup of rice or pasta, which contains about 80 to 100 calories, while cautioning that calorie counts will vary depending on how a product is made.

"FOR SOME WHOLE-GRAIN CEREALS, THERE ARE 80 CALORIES IN A 1/4 CUP; OTHERS, 1/3 CUP," SHE SAID.

Lieberman stressed the value of eating a variety of whole grains in addition to whole wheat, such as polenta, corn meal, brown rice, oats and barley. She mentioned that King Kullen carries a pasta made from quinoa, a whole grain that has as much zinc and protein as meat.

Lieberman said that the first item in an ingredient list should be a whole grain. SN read off a list of several ingredients and asked if they were whole grains. In answering, Lieberman explained the specific benefits of certain ingredients. In the case of wheat germ, for example, she said it's the part of the grain that's highest in vitamin E.

Asked for recommendations for a 5-year-old's lunchbox, Lieberman suggested Health Valley and Kame crackers, based on their nutritional value and taste, as well as low-fat Triscuits. She added that the government just added a children's section to its food pyramid Web site, www.mypyramid.gov.

Lieberman said most whole-grain products are in the Wild by Nature natural and organic department of the store near the SN reporter's home. (King Kullen carries natural and organics in all its stores, but has Wild By Nature stores-within-a-store at three units, according to its Web site. It also operates two freestanding Wild by Nature stores.)

The Wild by Nature department is set off with a large overhanging sign and wooden shelving. In addition to dry grocery, the department carries fresh, frozen and health and beauty care products.

Dry grocery includes a 4-foot cereal/breakfast section with such whole-grain products as Mother's wheat germ, Mother's whole-grain barley, Kashi whole-grain pilaf and Old Wessex oatmeal.

There's a 12-foot pasta/sauce section with items like Hodgson Mill whole-wheat spaghetti and Vita Spelt whole-grain pasta. On the day of SN's visit, various sizes of Hodgson Mill pastas were on sale for \$3 for two. SN also found Ancient Quinoa Harvest-brand corn-quinoa blend.

Whole-grain products were found in the mainstream dry grocery aisles as well. In the cookie/ cracker aisle, for instance, were Carr's whole-wheat crackers.