

CR Consumer Reports™

SMARTER CHOICES FOR A BETTER WORLD

SPECIAL REPORT

TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR HEART HEALTH

- > Diet and exercise changes that make a difference
- > Ratings of the nation's top heart hospitals
- > Screening tests you need—and don't



PLUS

NEW, TASTY
& HEALTHY
**ALTERNATIVE
PASTAS**

SOVING
**FAMILY MONEY
FIGHTS**

**A SURPRISE
MEDICAL BILL
THAT'S ON
THE RISE**

Product Updates



A New Twist on Pasta

Can penne made from chickpeas or fusilli made from lentils taste as good as the traditional stuff—and be healthier? We fork over our findings.

by Rachel Meltzer-Warren

“LIFE IS A COMBINATION of magic and pasta,” said the Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini. And a growing number of us looking to cut back on carbs, avoid gluten, and pump up our plant-protein intake are now turning to a new breed of noodles to perform those nutritional magic tricks.

Traditional pasta is made from semolina, a refined flour derived from durum wheat. But the new pastas are made from grains such as quinoa and legumes such as chickpeas and lentils. So-called alternative pastas—which Whole Foods named one of the top 10 food trends for 2017—are perceived as better for you. “They intersect with virtually every healthy food trend in today’s marketplace,” says Rachel Cheatham, Ph.D., an adjunct assistant professor of nutrition at Tufts University. So we tested

13 alternative pastas to see whether they meet consumer expectations for nutrition and taste.

Noodle Nutrition

Americans trying to eat fewer carbs may be disappointed to discover that the carb counts of these new pastas aren’t always much lower than regular pasta. A 2-ounce serving of traditional pasta—½ cup dry, which cooks up to about 1 cup—has about 43 grams of carbs. The same-size serving of the alternative pastas we looked at had 32 to 46 grams. Nor are there big differences in calorie counts: 2 ounces of dry regular pasta has 210 calories; bean or quinoa noodles have 190 to 210 calories.

But there are other reasons to add alternative pastas to your culinary repertoire. Eating legumes and

whole grains is linked to improved cardiovascular health, a lower risk for type 2 diabetes, and better weight control—benefits that can be attributed in great part to their protein and fiber content.

Like the beans themselves, legume pastas are packed with plant protein. The ones we tested ranged from 11 to 15 grams per 2-ounce serving. “The bean pastas are a good way for people who don’t like beans in their natural state to get the benefits of legumes,” says Amy Keating, R.D., a Consumer Reports dietitian.

Despite quinoa’s reputation for being a protein-rich grain, pastas made with it usually contain a blend of flours, sometimes including wheat. The ones we looked at had just 4 to 8 grams of protein per serving. (Regular pasta averages 7 grams.)

1. **Explore Cuisine** Organic Red Lentil Penne 2. **Ancient Harvest** Supergrain Organic Corn & Quinoa Blend Penne 3. **Banza** Penne Made From Chickpeas 4. **Pasta Lensi** Red Lentil Fusilli 5. **Ancient Harvest** POW Black Bean Elbows 6. **Tolerant** Organic Black Bean Penne 7. **Hodgson Mill** UltraGrain Penne With Quinoa 8. **Ancient Harvest** POW Red Lentil Rotini 9. **Explore Cuisine** Organic Chickpea Fusilli 10. **Tolerant** Organic Red Lentil Penne 11. **Pasta Lensi** Chickpea Casarecce 12. **Trader Joe’s** Organic Black Bean Rotini 13. **DeBoles** Quinoa Plus Golden Flax Penne.

Product Updates

All of the alternative pastas we tested had enough fiber to be considered a good source of the nutrient (3 or more grams per serving). But some had 8 or more grams. "Getting more fiber has many health benefits," says Marvin M. Lipman, M.D., Consumer Reports' chief medical adviser. "But if you aren't used to consuming large amounts in one sitting, it can cause bloating, cramping, and gas."

To avoid these issues, he says, increase fiber intake gradually and drink plenty of water.

Pasta made from beans and grains like quinoa often falls squarely in the gluten-free category. That doesn't make food more nutritious, but if you have a bona fide gluten intolerance, then the rise of alternative pastas may be a boon for you. Look for a logo that says "certified gluten-free," because not all alternative pastas are made from gluten-free ingredients.

The Truth About the Taste

High-quality traditional pasta will top a firm texture when cooked (al dente, or

"to the tooth"). It should be easy to bite into but have some resistance. As you chew it, the pasta should hold together, not crumble or melt away in your mouth. None of the bean or quinoa pastas met this standard, but the top-rated red-lentil pastas came the closest.

They were also tops in taste. None of the black-bean, chickpea, or quinoa pastas scored higher than Good for texture or taste. But the top-ranked brands in each category are still worth a try; the flavor and texture defects were less noticeable when the pastas were paired with the right toppings. (See "Give Red Sauce a Rest," at right.)

Alternative pastas are pricier than regular pasta. For packages of 8 to 12 ounces, we paid \$2.50 to \$10 for the bean and quinoa pastas we tested, with our top picks in each category costing \$2.50 to \$5 per box. But because of their protein content, spending more on spaghetti may translate into savings at the supermarket, Cheatham says.



Going With the Whole Grain

Whole-wheat pastas are a healthier choice than regular pasta, and the taste can be surprisingly similar.

> If you're looking for a more nutritious alternative to regular pasta that costs less than the legume and quinoa varieties, try whole-wheat. The package sizes of the products we tested were 12 to 16 ounces and the prices were \$1.50 to \$3 per box. Like white pasta, whole-wheat pasta is made from durum wheat but contains all three parts of the grain—bran, endosperm, and germ. That means it has more nutrients and fiber—about 3 to 4 additional grams per serving—than the regular kind, although its protein and calories are about the

same. (All seven scored Very Good for nutrition.)

Another plus: In terms of flavor and texture, some whole-wheat noodles come close to traditional ones. "Depending on which product you choose, the taste differences may not be all that noticeable, especially with a sauce," says Ellen Kloss, who led our tasting of alternative pastas. "Barilla Whole Grain Penne and Ronzoni Healthy Harvest 100% Whole Grain Penne Rigate, with Very Good taste ratings, stood out from the rest for their nutty whole-grain flavors

and their slightly chewy, springy texture."

The remaining five brands received Good ratings. In order of quality, they are De Cecco 100% Whole Wheat Penne Rigate, 365 Everyday Value (Whole Foods) Organic Whole Wheat Penne Rigate, Trader Giotta's (Trader Joe's) Organic Whole Wheat Penne Rigate, DeLallo Organic 100% Whole Wheat Penne Rigate, and Hodgson Mill Whole Wheat Whole Grain Penne. A flavorful sauce would mask some of the flavor and texture defects.



Give Red Sauce a Rest

The best toppings for bean pastas from CR's Claudia Gallo, a professional chef.



MEXICAN BLACK BEAN ROTINI

Combine 5½ cups cooked, drained hot pasta with 1 cup frozen corn kernels (defrosted), 1 chopped red pepper, 2 chopped tomatoes, ½ chopped small red onion, and 1 chopped avocado. For the dressing, combine ¼ cup fresh lime juice, ½ cup olive oil, ½ teaspoon salt, and ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper. Combine with black-bean mixture and top with chopped fresh cilantro. Makes 6 servings.



CHICKPEA FUSILLI FORMAGGIO

Toss 3½ cups cooked, drained hot pasta with ¼ cup olive oil, ¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese, and fresh parsley. Makes 4 servings.



RED, WHITE, AND GREEN ROTINI

Toss 4 cups cauliflower florets and 1 pint grape tomatoes in 3 tablespoons olive oil and ¼ teaspoon each salt and black pepper. Roast on a rimmed sheet pan at 425° F for 25 to 30 minutes. Add two cloves garlic, sliced, during last 5 minutes. Cook an 8-ounce package of red-lentil rotini and then drain, reserving 1 cup of pasta water. Stir in cauliflower mixture, 5 ounces of baby spinach, ½ cup grated Asiago cheese, and enough pasta water to moisten. Makes 4 servings.

Ratings > **Noodles by the Numbers** Calories and carbs are similar to regular pasta, but fiber and protein are usually higher.



Product	Rating		Nutrition Information					Pricing				Ingredients	CR's Take
	Taste	Nutrition	Calories	Fat (g)	Carbs (g)	Fiber (g)	Protein (g)	Package Size (oz)	Price Per Package (\$)	# Servings Per Package	Cost Per Serving (\$)		
RED LENTIL													
Ancient Harvest POW Red Lentil Rotini	▲	▲	200	1	35	7	14	8	4.50	4	1.13	Red-lentil flour, organic quinoa flour	Chewy, with a clean, complex flavor that tastes of red lentils. A tad crumbly and slightly chalky. Pairs well with red sauce.
Explore Cuisine Organic Red Lentil Penne	▲	▲	190	1	35	3	11	8	5.00	4	1.25	Organic red lentil flour (73%), organic brown-rice flour	Mild red lentil flavor, slightly earthy. Texture is soft and slightly chewy, with slight to moderate chalkiness.
Tolerant Organic Red Lentil Penne*	●	▲	200	1	35	7	14	12	9.00	6	1.50	Non-GMO organic red lentils	Earthy notes and slightly bitter. Slightly crumbly, mushy, and chalky texture. Flavor is better than texture.
Pasta Lensi Red Lentil Fusilli	●	▲	200	1	34	3	15	10	4.90	5	0.98	Red-lentil flour	Flavor is a bit earthy with a hint of bitterness. Texture gets mushy and chalky as you chew.
CHICKPEA													
Explore Cuisine Organic Chickpea Fusilli	●	▲	200	2.5	35	5	11	8	5.00	4	1.25	Organic chickpea flour (60%), organic brown-rice flour, organic tapioca starch, organic pea protein	Slightly starchy, beanlike flavor. Has a chewy, slightly rubbery texture, but it's still worth a try. Pairs well with red sauce, which made the flavor defects less noticeable.
Pasta Lensi Chickpea Casarecce	●	▲	210	3	34	7	12	10	3.50	5	0.70	Chickpea flour	Soft, with a beany flavor and a chalky, mushy texture. Slightly astringent.
Banza Penne Made From Chickpeas	▼	▲	190	3.5	32	8	14	8	3.00	4	0.75	Chickpeas, tapioca pea protein, xanthan gum	Moderately bitter. Mushy and slight chalky texture. Slightly astringent.
BLACK BEAN													
Trader Joe's Organic Black Bean Rotini	●	▲	200	1.5	35	15	14	12	3.00	6	0.50	Organic black-bean flour	Clean, good black-bean flavor and slight bitterness. Texture is slightly mushy, chalky, and crumbly. Astringent.
Tolerant Organic Black Bean Penne*	▼	▲	210	1	36	10	14	12	10.00	6	1.67	Non-GMO organic black beans	Black bean flavor with a slight to moderate bitterness. Chalky, slightly crumbly, and rather gritty. Astringent.
Ancient Harvest POW Black Bean Elbows	▼	▲	190	1	35	7	12	8	4.50	4	1.13	Black-bean flour, brown-rice flour, organic quinoa flour	Notable lingering bitterness overpowers mild black-bean flavor. Chalky and very soft, mushy, and sticky. Astringent.
QUINOA BLENDS													
Hodgson Mill UltraGrain Penne With Quinoa	●	●	190	1	41	3	8	12	2.50	6	0.42	Ultra-grain whole-wheat flour, durum flour, quinoa flour	Slight nutty taste that's reminiscent of whole-wheat pasta; slightly bitter and starchy. Chewy and slightly crumbly texture.
DeBoles Quinoa Plus Golden Flax Penne	●	●	200	2	43	3	5	8	3.60	4	0.90	Whole-grain brown-rice flour, rice flour, whole-grain quinoa flour, flaxseed, xanthan gum, ascorbic acid	Tastes of nondescript grains; one sample was moderately bitter and slightly sour. Starchy and crumbly.
Ancient Harvest Super-grain Organic Corn & Quinoa Blend Penne	●	●	210	1	46	4	4	8	3.00	4	0.75	Organic corn flour, organic quinoa flour	Tastes of nondescript grains; slightly sweet. Chewy, slightly crumbly texture. Astringent, with a grainy mouthfeel. Moderately bitter.

HOW WE TEST: We evaluated 13 legume- and quinoa-based pastas for nutrition and taste. Eight ounces of each pasta was cooked

in 2½ quarts of boiling water with 2 teaspoons of salt added. Using package directions, we established

the cooking time in an attempt to achieve an al dente texture before testing began. Each type (e.g., black bean) was evaluated separately.

Tastings were blind, and the taste and texture descriptions are based on sampling the pastas plain.

*The serving size on this product label is 3 ounces, but we calculated the values for 2 ounces for easy comparison with the other products.