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### Grain Bowls We Test This Tasty New Trend

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# The New Super Bowls

The latest food craze is deep dishes packed with whole grains, vegetables, and protein. Here, we taste and test to reveal which we think will bowl you over.

by Rachel Meltzer Warren



**78** Amy's Light & Lean Quinoa & Black Beans with Butternut Squash & Chard



**77** Luvo Planted Power Bowl Great Karma Coconut Curry



**75** Healthy Choice Simply Steamers Unwrapped Burrito Bowl



**74** Kashi Chimichurri Quinoa Bowl



**74** Luvo Planted Power Bowl Mighty Masala & Greens



**72** Luvo Planted Power Bowl So Cal Kale & Bean



**72** Kashi Black Bean Mango Bowl



**72** Smart Ones SmartMade Mexican-Style Chicken Bowl



**71** Kashi Sweet Potato Quinoa Bowl



**70** Sweet Earth Curry Tiger



**70** Smart Ones SmartMade Orange Sesame Chicken Bowl



**70** Amy's Bowls Harvest Casserole



**69** **Smart Ones SmartMade**  
Mediterranean-Style  
Chicken Bowl



**67** **Luvo Bowl** Chicken Harissa  
& Chickpeas



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Moroccan Tagine



**65** **Evol**  
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**61** **Sweet Earth**  
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**59** **Smart Ones**  
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Peanut Chicken & Broccoli



**59** **Smart Ones**  
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Sesame Beef & Broccoli



**57** **Evol**  
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**57** **Evol Lean & Fit**  
Teriyaki Chicken



**54** **Grainful**  
Jambalaya



**54** **Smart Ones**  
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Pulled Pork Bowl



**53** **Healthy Choice**  
Cafe Steamers Simply  
Chicken Fried Rice



**52** **Amy's Bowls**  
Teriyaki

**THEY GO BY MANY NAMES:** “power bowls,” “grain bowls” ... even the enlightened-sounding “Buddha bowls.” But no matter what they’re dubbed, we’ve concluded that they’re the ultimate healthy comfort food. What are they, exactly? Picture a mix of whole grains, like warm quinoa or wild rice, tossed with greens, such as shredded kale or organic arugula. Add in more veggies, such as roasted corn and peppers and fresh tomatoes. Next is the protein—think roasted chicken, or tofu, black beans, or a dollop of goat cheese and a sprinkling of sunflower seeds. Then it’s all tossed with a flavor-packed sauce or a splash of dressing, like pesto vinaigrette.

Bowl meals are “filling, and you get a mix of flavors and textures in every bite,” says Amy Keating, R.D., a CR dietitian. “Plus their ingredients tend to be what people think of as ‘power’ or ‘super’ foods, those they should be getting more of in their diet.” A modern twist on the whole-grain-based macrobiotic bowls popular in the 1960s, they had a revival when cutting-edge salad joints, like Sweetgreen, and fast casual restaurants with a health bent, like Chipotle, brought well-balanced meals-in-a-bowl to the masses. In fact, according to food-industry

consulting firm Technomic, bowl meal offerings on restaurant menus have increased by more than 30 percent over the past seven years.

It's no wonder then that grain bowls are starting to pop up in the frozen food aisle, too, alongside lasagna, chicken stir-fry, and microwave-ready burritos. "Bowl mania really hit its stride this year, and frozen food manufacturers have taken notice," says Consumer Reports' nutritionist Ellen Klosz. "When we started exploring the supermarket options, we were surprised by how many there were, so we looked at the category to see just how healthy and tasty frozen grain bowls could be."

### Tracking a Tasty Trend

As many as two-thirds of grocery shoppers are looking for foods with fewer and simpler ingredients, according to market research firm Packaged Facts. "For the most part, grain bowls—even frozen ones—deliver on this front. The ones in our tests contained simple, recognizable ingredients, such as whole grains, vegetables, protein, and seasonings," Klosz says. Several bowls were labeled vegan, meaning they contain no animal products whatsoever, and others were labeled organic, gluten-free, or non-GMO.

Bowl meals make it easy to get healthful foods into your diet. Whole grains, usually the base of bowl meals, have long been linked to improved heart health and decreased risk of

diabetes. Newer research finds that subbing whole grains for refined ones, such as white rice or white bread, may help people manage their weight. This is achieved by speeding up metabolism and decreasing the number of calories the body holds on to during digestion—by as much as 100 calories per day, according to a

## Rethinking Your Chicken Choices

Burrito, frozen bowl, or takeout bowl? Have a close look at the nutritional values before you stick a fork in it.

When you're short on time or energy, takeout or a frozen meal can be a solution to the problem of getting a nutritious dinner on the table fast. But even health-sounding dishes with similar ingredients and approximately the same serving size can vary greatly in nutrition. We compared a frozen Mexican-style chicken power bowl with both a frozen chicken burrito and a chicken burrito bowl from a chain restaurant and found big differences.

**Red's Organic**  
Chicken, Cilantro  
& Lime Burrito,  
2 (9 oz.)



<b>Calories</b>	<b>500</b>
Fat (g)	18
Sat. Fat (g)	4
Protein (g)	24
Carbohydrates (g)	66
Fiber (g)	2
Sugars (g)	2
Sodium (mg)	940

Made with: flour tortilla, chicken, brown rice, black beans, cheddar cheese, tomatoes, corn, red peppers

**Smart Ones**  
SmartMade  
Mexican-Style  
Chicken Bowl (9 oz.)



<b>Calories</b>	<b>260</b>
Fat (g)	5
Sat. Fat (g)	2.5
Protein (g)	21
Carbohydrates (g)	33
Fiber (g)	6
Sugars (g)	6
Sodium (mg)	530

Made with: poblano peppers, black beans, red bell peppers, onions, corn, chicken, brown rice, Monterey Jack cheese, sauce

**Qdoba Burrito**  
Bowl (9.5 oz.)



<b>Calories</b>	<b>550</b>
Fat (g)	21
Sat. Fat (g)	8
Protein (g)	27
Carbohydrates (g)	73
Fiber (g)	9
Sugars (g)	9
Sodium (mg)	1,335

Made with: tequila lime chicken, cilantro lime rice, cilantro lime dressing, black bean/corn salsa, Cotija cheese

## A Side Dish With a Nutritional Kick

A frozen vegetarian power bowl makes a more nutritious side dish than a packaged, flavored grain mix side.

Frozen power bowls tend to contain more whole grains, vegetables, and legumes, plus a lot less sodium, says Amy Keating, R.D., a CR dietitian. We compared three of our top-rated power bowls with similarly flavored packaged grain dishes. The nutritional values are for about 1-cup servings of each, as prepared.

**Luvo**



Planted Power Bowl So Cal Kale & Bean

<b>150</b>	<b>Calories</b>	<b>200</b>
3.5	Fat (g)	3
0	Sat. Fat (g)	0
5	Protein (g)	5
27	Carbohydrates (g)	38
5.5	Fiber (g)	3
7	Sugars (g)	0
180	Sodium (mg)	560

**Uncle Ben's**



Ready Whole Grain Medley Quinoa & Brown Rice with Garlic



95 studies on the health benefits of fruit and vegetables published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, the biggest reduction in the risk of heart disease and stroke came from eating about 28 ounces of fruit and vegetables per day. But smaller amounts were protective, too: For every 7 ounces of produce eaten daily—equal to about a cup of cherry tomatoes and a large carrot—the drop in risk of developing these diseases ranged from 8 to 18 percent.

Though meat does serve as the protein source in some grain bowls, many feature plant-based proteins, such as beans or tofu. “Meat is increasingly becoming a side dish or a condiment in meals, rather than the main event,” Keating says. And for those who need some convincing, bowl meals may make a plant-based dinner more palatable. One-third of the U.S. population says it would like to eat less meat, according to Truven Health Analytics, a market research firm. But on a plate, a small (or nonexistent) serving of meat next to a pile of produce and grains may not look so enticing. Mix the same foods in a bowl and add a sauce, and the divergence from the standard “meat, potatoes, and veggie” feels less intimidating.

## No More Fear of Frozen

Frozen meals don’t often get high marks for healthfulness or flavor. But in our tests of 26 power bowls,

15 received a high enough overall score—a combination of nutrition and taste ratings—to make our recommended list, and not one received lower than a Good overall score.

Seven of the bowls got Excellent ratings for nutrition, because they supplied at least a third of the daily value for fiber, contained less than 500 mg of sodium, and had little, if any, added sugars. In fact, a lower sodium count is one advantage that frozen grain bowls have over many traditional frozen dinners. Though it’s not hard to find frozen entrées with upward of 800 mg of sodium, only a handful of bowls in our tests topped 650 mg. “At \$3.50 to \$6.00 per meal, you’re getting a meal that’s healthier than a lot of the frozen fare on the market for about the same or a little more money,” Klosz says.

Healthfulness didn’t come at the expense of taste, however: Our team of professional tasters was actually surprised that some of the meals came from the freezer case. Despite their overall lower sodium content, none were described as bland. “Higher-quality ingredients in the top-rated bowls gave them plenty of flavor,” says Klosz, “and the majority of meals in this category were inspired by cuisines with strong flavor profiles, such as Asian, Indian, and Mexican.” What’s more, “the spices seemed fresh, not dehydrated,” she says. And in many of these dishes, the veggies weren’t mushy or waterlogged, which we’ve

seen in other types of frozen meals.

Interestingly, the completely vegetarian or vegan meals, such as Amy’s Light & Lean Quinoa & Black Beans with Butternut Squash & Chard and Luvo Planted Power Bowl Great Karma Coconut Curry, were flavor favorites of our testers. By contrast, “gristly” or “dry and chewy” were comments they made about the meat and poultry in many of the dishes that contained those proteins.

The calorie counts of most of the frozen bowls in our tests were on the low side for a meal, hovering in the 250 to 300 range. That’s usually not the case with bowls at restaurants or the ones you make yourself at home. “It’s similar to salads. While the majority of the ingredients in grain bowls are healthful, you can get carried away and pile them on,” says Keating. “If you include a lot of calorie-dense foods, like avocado, dressing, or nuts, or big portions of whole grains, it’s pretty easy to make a bowl that has 700 calories or more.” If your frozen bowl meal is smaller than you’d like, toss it on a bed of greens, like baby spinach or arugula, or top with some raw or steamed vegetables to bulk it up for just a few additional calories.



LEARN

For more information on healthy foods and nutrition, check out our food and drink guide at [CR.org/Foods1017](http://CR.org/Foods1017).

### Kashi



Black Bean  
Mango Bowl

248	Calories	415
7	Fat (g)	11
1	Sat. Fat (g)	1.5
8	Protein (g)	10
42	Carbohydrates (g)	68
8	Fiber (g)	6
9	Sugars (g)	2
203	Sodium (mg)	1,360

### Goya



Rice & Black  
Beans

### Healthy Choice



Simply Steamers  
Unwrapped  
Burrito Bowl

203	Calories	360
3	Fat (g)	12
1	Sat. Fat (g)	1.5
7	Protein (g)	7
38	Carbohydrates (g)	57
9	Fiber (g)	3
2	Sugars (g)	4
263	Sodium (mg)	800

### Knorr



Selects Rustic  
Mexican Rice &  
Beans

**Ratings** > **Going Bowling** With whole grains and veggies, power bowls—a new entry into the frozen food case—can be smart nutritional picks. Unless otherwise noted, meals are vegan.

Recommended	Product	Overall Score	Rating		Nutrition Information								Price	Flavor & Texture Description	
			Nutrition	Taste	Serving/Package Size (oz)	Calories	Fat (g)	Saturated Fat (g)	Protein (g)	Carbohydrates (g)	Fiber (g)	Sugar (g)			Sodium (mg)
\$	<b>Amy's Light &amp; Lean Quinoa &amp; Black Beans with Butternut Squash &amp; Chard</b>	78	⬆️	⬆️	8	240	5	0.5	10	38	11	6	440	\$4.20	Quinoa with plentiful seasoned black beans, butternut squash, and some Swiss chard and carrots. Hints of garlic and ginger.
✓	<b>Luvo Planted Power Bowl Great Karma Coconut Curry</b>	77	⬆️	⬆️	10	330	15	5	10	45	9	5	390	\$6.00	Indian-style vegetable and grain bowl with lots of vegetables, chickpeas (regular and green), and black lentils. Seasoned with a flavorful, fiery spicy curry sauce with a hint of sweetness and coconut.
\$	<b>Healthy Choice Simply Steamers Unwrapped Burrito Bowl</b>	75	⬆️	⬆️	9	270	4	1	9	50	12	3	350	\$4.00	Big spicy heat. Cilantro flavor comes through in this mix of rice, beans (pinto and black), and sweet roasted corn. Tomatillo sauce gives it a slight citrusy taste.
\$	<b>Kashi Chmichurri Quinoa Bowl</b>	74	⬆️	⬆️	9	260	8	1.5	10	42	10	5	350	\$4.00	Boldly flavored spicy mix of red quinoa, lentils, beans, potatoes, and vegetables in a tangy chimichurri-style sauce with vinegar note.
✓	<b>Luvo Planted Power Bowl Mighty Masala &amp; Greens</b>	74	⬆️	⬆️	10	300	13	3.5	11	41	9	5	390	\$6.00	Indian-spiced grain vegetable bowl with brown rice, petite black lentils, and plentiful vegetables, including kale, green chickpeas, and red peppers. Fairly spicy overall, with moderate heat.
✓	<b>Luvo Planted Power Bowl So Cal Kale &amp; Bean</b>	72	⬆️	⬆️	10.25	300	7	0.5	10	53	11	14	360	\$6.00	Unusual combination of ingredients—white and red beans, rice, mushrooms, kale, broccoli, raisins, and carrots. Red wine vinegar adds a tangy flavor. Slightly sweet with cumin and dried thyme. Has some heat.
\$	<b>Kashi Black Bean Mango Bowl</b>	72	⬆️	⬆️	10	330	9	1	10	56	11	12	270	\$4.00	Black beans, carrots, bell peppers, and lots of grains in this bowl. Sauce has more of a general sweet taste rather than tasting like mango. Diced jalapeno peppers that add pockets of heat.
\$	<b>Smart Ones SmartMade Mexican-Style Chicken Bowl</b>	72	⬆️	⬆️	9	260	5	2.5	21	33	6	6	530	\$3.50	Mexican-style rice, black bean, and chicken bowl with smoky notes from roasted corn and peppers, including poblano. Balanced seasonings overall, with hint of citrus lime. Chicken is better than in most others. Not vegan.
\$	<b>Kashi Sweet Potato Quinoa Bowl</b>	71	⬆️	⬆️	9	300	8	1.5	9	50	7	9	440	\$4.00	Flavorful combination with red quinoa, brown rice, sweet potatoes, black beans, roasted poblano peppers, kale, and caramelized red onion in a tomato base that is slightly sweet and tangy. Jalapenos add heat.
\$	<b>Sweet Earth Curry Tiger</b>	70	⬆️	⬆️	9	370	20	11	15	35	8	9	450	\$3.50	Indian-inspired curry spice blend with plentiful lentils, large broccoli pieces, sweet potato, and carrots. Spicy but not overpowering. You can tell the vegetables are frozen, and the seasoned seitan (wheat gluten) pieces are fairly chewy.
\$	<b>Smart Ones SmartMade Orange Sesame Chicken Bowl</b>	70	⬆️	⬆️	9	240	4.5	1	21	30	5	10	530	\$3.50	Quinoa and veggie bowl with broccoli, red peppers, and snap peas in a sweet and sour sauce with a mild orange citrus flavor. Large chicken chunks are a bit dry. Not vegan.
\$	<b>Amy's Bowls Harvest Casserole</b>	70	⬆️	⬆️	10	320	10	1.5	13	44	7	8	650	\$4.00	Mix of plentiful red beans, brown rice, broccoli, kale, and sweet potatoes that has an Asian flare with ginger and soy notes. Big bean flavor and slightly tangy. Also includes pumpkin seeds and sparse, heavily seasoned, slightly sooty tofu.
✓	<b>Smart Ones SmartMade Mediterranean-Style Chicken Bowl</b>	69	⬆️	⬇️	9	260	9	4	19	29	5	6	510	\$3.50	Mediterranean-style bowl with strips of chicken, quinoa, chickpeas, kale and artichokes, seasoned with onion, garlic, and dried oregano. Unique flavor profile. Has a tangy tomato sauce. Hints of feta. Texture of chicken pieces varied. Not vegan.

Recommended	Product	Overall Score	Rating		Nutrition Information								Price	Flavor & Texture Description	
			Nutrition	Taste	Serving/Package Size (oz.)	Calories	Fat (g)	Saturated Fat (g)	Protein (g)	Carbohydrates (g)	Fiber (g)	Sugars (g)			Sodium (mg)
✓	<b>Luvo Bowl</b> Chicken Horissa & Chickpeas	67	⬆️	⬇️	8.25	270	10	1.5	16	27	5	2	330	\$6.00	Boldly flavored Indian-spiced dish with brown rice, broccoli, chickpeas, and other vegetables. Chicken pieces fall somewhat short. They're on the dry and chewy side. Not vegan.
💰	<b>Sweet Earth</b> Moroccan Tagine	67	⬆️	⬆️	9	280	6	1	11	49	10	13	690	\$3.50	Moroccan-style grain and vegetable bowl with seitan pieces, sweet potato, and chickpeas with moderate spicy heat. Flavorful and intensely seasoned but leaves a slightly bitter aftertaste.
	<b>Evol</b> Fire Grilled Steak	65	⬆️	⬇️	9	400	18	4	20	40	8	3	520	\$4.00	Strips of marinated beef, black beans, and rice with fresh-tasting red and green peppers and roasted corn. Notes of cilantro and lime add complexity. Beef is slightly chewy. Not vegan.
	<b>Sweet Earth</b> Bean & Mango Cubano	61	⬆️	⬇️	9	360	10	1	13	53	14	14	490	\$3.50	Quinoa, cumin, spiced black beans, and mango are the main components. Mango tastes unripe and not sweet. Overall has a tangy flavor with slight heat, but cumin overpowers a bit. Looks better than it tastes.
	<b>Grainful</b> Unstuffed Pepper	61	⬆️	⬇️	10	250	7	1.5	17	29	5	4	490	\$4.50	Grain bits and ground white meat chicken with a puréed texture. Flavors of red and green peppers, garlic, onion, tomato, and dehydrated spices. Slight heat and slight fennel note. Not vegan.
	<b>Smart Ones</b> SmartMade Spicy Peanut Chicken & Broccoli	59	⬆️	⬇️	9	250	7	1	19	29	5	7	610	\$3.50	Brown rice and vegetables (carrots, scallion, broccoli, and onions) in a mild peanut-flavored sauce with soy and spicy heat. Vegetables taste frozen and have a soft texture. Chicken pieces are gritty and flavor is off slightly. Not vegan.
	<b>Smart Ones</b> SmartMade Grilled Sesame Beef & Broccoli	59	⬆️	⬇️	9	220	5	2	14	31	5	10	610	\$3.50	Beef with snow peas, broccoli, and roasted red peppers in a sauce with tomato, soy, onion, garlic, and slight heat. Some beef pieces are dry and chewy, others are tender. Not vegan.
	<b>Evol</b> Sriracha Chicken	57	⬆️	⬇️	9	260	4.5	1	16	39	4	7	640	\$4.00	Big Sriracha heat in this ordinary mixture of plentiful brown rice, chicken, and veggies. Typical frozen vegetable texture. Includes snap peas, broccoli, and carrots. Chicken lacking a bit of freshness. Not vegan.
	<b>Evol</b> Lean & Fit Teriyaki Chicken	57	⬆️	⬇️	9	260	2.5	0	14	45	4	12	600	\$4.00	Teriyaki chicken with brown rice and blend of snap peas, carrots, broccoli, and red and green peppers. Sweet sauce with soy. Not vegan.
	<b>Grainful</b> Jambalaya	54	⬆️	⬇️	10	270	11	3	11	32	5	3	470	\$4.50	Chewy, gritty sausage and grain bits in a puréed mix that tastes mostly of red peppers, garlic, and paprika. Spicy and hot with a big smoky flavor that overwhelms. Not well-balanced. Not vegan.
	<b>Smart Ones</b> SmartMade Mexican-Style Pulled Pork Bowl	54	⬆️	⬇️	10	320	9	4.5	26	33	7	5	670	\$3.50	Mixture of rice, black beans, roasted corn, onions, peppers, and pork pieces. Sauce has tangy tomatillo flavor with a slight cheese note. Some meat pieces are fatty, and the flavor detracts. Pork is the weakest component. Not vegan.
	<b>Healthy Choice</b> Cafe Steamers Simply Chicken Fried Rice	53	⬆️	⬇️	10	320	7	1.5	22	43	4	9	580	\$4.00	Chicken, brown rice, edamame, carrots, and spongy egg pieces that don't add much flavor. Chicken texture is just mediocre. Sauce lacks fullness, with ginger and garlic that doesn't taste fresh, and a very slight bitterness. Rice and vegetables are the best part. Not vegan.
	<b>Amy's Bowls</b> Teriyaki	52	⬆️	⬇️	9.5	290	4.5	0.5	12	52	6	15	780	\$5.00	Asian-seasoned tofu "stir-fry" with brown rice, broccoli, green beans, carrots, and scallion mushrooms. You can tell the vegetables are frozen. Slightly sweet teriyaki seasoning with garlic and soy.

**HOW WE TEST:** CR's nutrition and food-testing team rated power bowls for nutrition and taste. The Overall Score is

a combination of the two. The Nutrition score is based on energy density (calories per gram of food), total fat,

saturated fat, fiber, sugars, sodium, and other nutrients. Extra weighting is given for influential nutrients, either positive or

negative, respective to the food. Taste ratings are based on the results of a blind tasting panel of trained sensory experts.