The frozen-food aisle isn't what it used to be. Sure, you'll still find the familiar stacks of boxed “healthy” entrees and meals from Lean Cuisine, Healthy Choice, Smart Ones, and others. Most have barely enough food for dieters or your Aunt Sadie (you know, the one who eats like a bird). But with at least 500 or 600 milligrams—of sodium, they sure don’t skimp in the salt department (though they’re lower than the 750 to 1,300 mg of sodium you’d get in a regular Stouffer’s or Marie Callender’s).

What’s new? Alongside the single-serve boxes are a growing number of frozen meals in multi-serve bags. They’re still salty, but you can cut the salt—and create a healthier meal—by adding your own fresh or frozen vegetables.

Here’s a sampling of frozen entrées or meals that come with no more than about 400 mg of sodium...and some fixer-uppers that drop below 400 mg—in fact, the sodium gets cut roughly in half—if you add an equal amount of veggies.

Information compiled by Danielle Hazard.

When was the last time your frozen entrée consisted of plantains, black beans, sweet potato, kale, whole grain pilaf, amaranth polenta, and spicy ancho sauce? Clearly, this isn’t your mother’s Lean Cuisine.

Kashi Mayan Harvest Bake doesn’t just combine any old vegetables with beans and whole grains. It picks nutrient-rich veggies like kale and sweet potatoes. That’s why every single-serve tray delivers a day’s worth of vitamin A, 20 percent of a day’s vitamin C and iron, and an impressive 8 grams of fiber that comes largely from intact grains and beans, not inulin, maltodextrin, or other poorly absorbed carbohydrates that masquerade as fiber.

And the sodium (380 milligrams) is far less than you’d get in most 340-calorie entrées (and in most other Kashi entrées, which can hit 750 mg). But with flavorful plantains and sweet potato and that spicy ancho sauce, the salt shaker won’t cross your mind.

Also worth trying: Kashi’s delicious sweet and spicy Black Bean Mango (380 mg of sodium, 340 calories, and 7 grams of fiber).

Bonus: Kashi’s box is made of 100 percent recycled paperboard, and the company has trimmed its packaging weight. “Our new packaging uses less material, which means less energy and water to make it, and a reduction in the number of our trucks on the road,” explains the box. Nice.
MARK IT

Lean Cuisine Market Creations are “like nothing you’ve tasted before,” says the product’s Web site. “Ingredients steam to perfection—tender meats, crisp veggies and al dente pasta—and taste so good, you’ll never believe they were frozen.”

That’s a bit over the top. Also over the top is Market Creations’ sodium -670 to 700 milligrams per (10 oz.) bag. That’s for only about 270 calories and 1 cup of food. Solution: add veggies.

That’s what we did with Market Creations Shrimp Scampi—a mix of shrimp with pasta, broccoli, yellow carrots, and red peppers in a lemon garlic sauce.

When we added 1 cup of microwaved frozen broccoli (you could easily add steamed fresh broccoli instead), one serving became two and the sodium dropped to around 350 mg per cup. Bonus: the potassium in the added broccoli helps counter the excess salt in the Market Creations.

How did it taste? Darned good.

Why bother with pasta that isn’t whole grain? Because, fortunately, there isn’t much of it in the Shrimp Scampi.

Lean Cuisine Spa Cuisine uses whole-grain rice and pasta, and about half of Healthy Choice All Natural Entrées are part whole grain. (Bravo to both!) Unfortunately, they also deliver 450 to 600 mg of sodium per serving. That’s lower than most of the competition, but why can’t they get below 400?

EASY JOE’S

Looking for something to tuck away in the freezer for evenings when cooking is so not an option? If you’re lucky enough to live near a Trader Joe’s, try Trader Giotto’s Roasted Vegetable Multi-Grain Lasagna.

Okay, it’s not perfect. Each 260-calorie serving (¼ tray) has 440 milligrams of sodium, which is more than our 400 mg cutoff (though it’s far less than the 1,010 mg you’d get from a similar-size serving of Stouffer’s party size Vegetable Lasagna.) And the multi-grain pasta is mostly white flour. But after a short 12 to 15 minutes in the microwave, out comes a vegetable-rich, cheesy, vegetarian lasagna that should please all palates.

Saturated fat? A great-for-lasagna 2½ grams.

Another Trader Joe’s find: Toss a bag of frozen Fire Roasted Bell Peppers and Onions (they have no added salt) with a bag of frozen Penne Arrabbiata or Penne Pepperonata in the skillet or microwave. If you divide the entire contents into four 1-cup servings, the Arrabbiata ends up with 360 mg of sodium per serving and the Pepperonata with 220 mg. And you end up with more vitamins A and C and potassium.

You can even add some whole-grain pasta or drained-and-rinsed (or unsalted) white beans to stretch it further. Each of the pennies has more than enough kick to carry the extras.

BISTRO BEAT

Turkey breast in rosemary mushroom sauce with green beans & lentil-quinoa pilaf. That’s what you get in Organic Bistro Whole Life Meals Savory Turkey dinner. That and only 1½ grams of saturated fat and an almost-unheard-of-for-a-frozen-entrée 240 milligrams of sodium in a 370-calorie serving. (Ounce for ounce, Marie Callender’s Turkey with Stuffing has nearly four times as much sodium.)

And those calories come with 7 grams of fiber (more than a quarter of a day’s worth), 30 percent of a day’s iron, 13 percent of a day’s potassium, and 10 to 20 percent of a day’s vitamin A, vitamin C, and magnesium. Not bad.

The pricey line has a few duds—the Wild Salmon needs work and the Alaskan Salmon Cake is hopeless. But other Organic Bistros—which range from 110 mg to 430 mg of sodium—use ingredients like coriander, thyme, sun-dried tomatoes, and shiitake mushrooms to make their whole grains, beans, and vegetables come alive. Another plus: the boxes are made of 100 percent recycled paperboard.

The next time you find yourself at a Whole Foods or similar market, check them out.

GIMME LIGHT

How many companies can you name with a “Light in Sodium” line?

We thought so.

Amy’s gets a gold star just for developing the line, which includes canned soups, chilis, and refried beans, as well as frozen entrées, meals, bowls, pizzas, and more. All come in at less than 400 milligrams of sodium.

Our favorite: the nearly-all-organic Indian Mattar Paneer. The 320-calorie dish—curried peas and paneer cheese, chana masala (garbanzo beans and tomatoes), and (white) basmati rice—has 390 mg of sodium. That’s half what you’d get in Amy’s regular Indian Mattar Paneer. But you’d never know it. Indian dishes may be easier to de-salt because of their spiced sauces, garlic, and onions.

As for Amy’s other Light in Sodium frozen entrées, the reviews were mixed. The Vegetable Lasagna was delicious (and part whole-grain), but the Black Bean Vegetable Enchilada, Mexican Casserole Bowl, Country Cheddar Bowl, and Veggie Loaf were uninspired. And—except for the Brown Rice & Vegetables Bowl and part-whole-grain-but-fatty Macaroni & Cheese—most were refined grain.

Memo to Amy: Try more Indian dishes. Memo to other brands: Where’s your Light in Sodium line?