Some foods get all the attention and don’t deserve it. Others are gems that go largely unnoticed.

It’s not just a coincidence. Some high-profile foods are backed by hefty ad budgets, while other foods have nothing but your grandmother’s (long-forgotten) endorsement.

It’s time to set the record straight.

Information compiled by Danielle Hazard.

**OVERRATED**

**Granola**

Back in the 1960s, people made their own granola by baking a mix of ingredients like whole oats, nuts, sunflower seeds, raisins, oil, and honey.

Today, you’re also likely to find table sugar and/or corn syrup. And some granolas—like the kind that McDonald’s and Starbucks use in their fruit & yogurt parfaits—contain rice flour or “crisp rice” (sweetened white rice).

Granola’s problem: calories. Most brands deliver at least 200 per serving...and for many, a serving is a mere half cup. We found one brand, Bear Naked, that uses a quarter cup. That’s four level tablespoons. A cup of its Banana Nut granola packs 560 calories. Even Bear Naked’s Fit granola has 480 calories per cup.

Tip: Unless you can afford 400 to 550 calories in 1 cup of cereal—or you eat no more than ½ cup—watch out for dense cereals like granola, Grape-Nuts, or muesli. If you’re a granola fan, at least mix it with your favorite whole grain flakes, puffs, or squares, which are typically less dense.

**Smoothies**

It’s fine to make your own smoothies at home with low-fat yogurt or milk and fresh or frozen fruit (though it’s better to eat, rather than drink, your calories if you’re watching your weight).

But commercial smoothies are a different story, thanks largely to added sugar and giant servings of juice.

At Smoothie King (with 600 locations nationwide) the “Trim Down” smoothies typically range from 250 to 350 calories in a small (20 oz.) to (gulp) 500 to 700 calories in a large (40 oz.). A large “Stay Healthy,” “Get Energy,” or “Snack Right” has 500 to 1,100 calories.

Yet people think smoothies are diet food. And some folks fall for—and pay extra for—Smoothie King’s supplement scams like “2-Week Weight Loss Acai Berry Cleanse & Flush” or “Super Boost Green Tea Fat Burning.”

At Cold Stone Creamery, a small Sinless Smoothie (juice, fruit, and Splenda) can have as few as 110 calories. But Cold Stone’s Lifestyle Smoothies pack about 200 calories for a small (“Like It”) to 600 calories for a large (“Gotta Have It”). And Baskin-Robbins’ Fruit Blast Smoothies range from roughly 400 to 850 calories, depending on the size. They’re “made with real fruit”...and a load of sugar.
OVERRATED

**Vegetable Juice**

“2 Full Servings of Vegetables,” announces the V8 label. Big deal. V8 is mostly reconstituted tomato juice. How do we know that its other juices are scarce? The most abundant non-tomato vegetable juice in V8 is carrot. (Then come celery, beets, parsley, lettuce, watercress, and spinach.) One cup of carrot juice contains 900 percent of a day’s vitamin A. One cup of V8 contains 40 percent.

And unless you buy Low Sodium V8, you get 600 milligrams of sodium in every 11½ oz. can. (That much Low Sodium V8 has 200 mg.) Granted, V8 used to have more sodium. But 600 mg is still 40 percent of a day’s worth.

Also overrated: V8 V-Fusion, which promises a serving of vegetables plus a serving of fruit. The “fruit” in a flavor like Pomegranate Blueberry is mostly apple and grape juice. The “vegetables” include sweet potato and carrot (and tomato) concentrate, but not much, since a cup of Pomegranate Blueberry V8 V-Fusion has just 15 percent of a day’s vitamin A.

Bottom line: Once you strip away the advertising, V8 isn’t much better than watered-down tomato sauce.

**Pita Chips**

“The art of taking things that are simple, uncluttered, uncomplicated, and making them better— fresher, more contemporary, more beautiful, more delicious…” That’s Stacy’s philosophy.

Until the business was sold to Frito-Lay, Stacy was making a bundle selling white flour, oil, salt, and seasonings.

The question is: what (other than the designer bag and price tag) gives pita chips their classy image? An ounce of Simply Naked (about 10 chips) delivers 130 calories and 270 milligrams of sodium. That’s not much different than the 150 calories and 180 mg of sodium in an ounce of Nacho Cheese Doritos.

It’s not just Stacy. New York Style, Trader Joe’s, and other companies are happy to sell you white flour dressed up as pita chips, bagel chips, focaccia sticks, and flatbreads. That’s one heckuva philosophy.

**Energy Bars**

“More Energy to Muscles with C2 MAX,” boasts the Performance Energy PowerBar label. C2 MAX was found to “improve athletes’ cycling times by 8%.”

In fact, C2 MAX (a “dual source energy blend”) is just a mixture of fructose and glucose (like ordinary sugar and high-fructose corn syrup but in different proportions).

Apparently, trained cyclists did slightly better (in their third hour of cycling) after drinking 860 calories of the two sugars than after drinking 860 calories of glucose alone.¹ You’d have to eat 8½ PowerBars—at $2 a pop—to get that much sugar.

Clif Bars also claim to be “energy bars.” They have more nuts and oats than Performance Energy PowerBars, but they’re still glued together with 4 to 6 teaspoons of sugar. And don’t think that Clif Luna Bars (“The Whole Nutrition Bar for Women”) are any better.

Since when is “whole nutrition” a mix of soy protein isolate, rice flour, and sugar?

Energy means calories, according to the Food and Drug Administration. If you need some, eat some real food, not a vitamin-fortified, soy-spiked cookie or candy bar.

Bottom line: All bars (cereal, fiber, whatever) are overrated foods.

SPECIAL FEATURE

UNDERRATED

Sunflower Seeds

Almonds, walnuts, pecans. You often hear about their virtues. But sunflower seeds are rarely in the spotlight. (That’s partly because there’s no seed-industry group that sponsors research and plugs sunflower seeds like the International Tree Nut Council Nutrition Research & Education Foundation does for almonds, Brazil nuts, cashews, hazelnuts, macadamias, pecans, pine nuts, pistachios, and walnuts.) That’s a shame, because sunflower seeds are at least as good as most nuts...and they’re cheaper. A quarter cup of sunflower seeds has 3 grams of fiber and 6 grams of protein plus 25 to 75 percent of a day’s copper, vitamin E, selenium, and manganese and roughly 10 percent of a day’s zinc, magnesium, and vitamin B-6.

For a snack, buy sunflower seeds in the shell (it will slow down your munching). For tossing on salads or yogurt, buy them raw, unsalted, and shell-free. (You can easily roast them in a toaster oven for richer flavor.) There’s only one catch: every ¼ cup contains 180 calories...and it’s tough to stop there.

Garbanzo Beans

All beans are good beans. They’re rich in protein, fiber, iron, magnesium, potassium, and zinc. And they’re dirt cheap in cans, and cheaper if you buy them dried. What’s more, Eden Organic has a line of no-salt-added beans that come in cans with liners that are free of BPA. (Some animal studies have suggested that BPA increases the risk of cancer, diabetes, and heart disease and that it may alter some behaviors that are influenced by hormones. See Nutrition Action, Apr. 2008, p. 8.)

But garbanzos (chickpeas) stand out because they’re so versatile. Just drain, rinse, and toss a handful on your green salad.

If you have an extra few minutes, dress them up with chopped scallions, olive oil, and lemon juice. Or coat with olive oil, balsamic vinegar, and fresh chopped garlic and serve as is or roast (stirring occasionally) until they’re crunchy.

You can also throw garbanzo beans into vegetable stews, curries, and soups; mix them with brown rice, whole wheat couscous, bulgur, or other whole grains; stir them into your chili; or add them to a pot of simmering greens.

They’re the easiest beans around.

Unsweetened Yogurt

Americans eat plenty of yogurt, but one look in the dairy case tells you that most of it is sweetened. You have to hunt to find “plain” (unsweetened) yogurt. That’s too bad.

A typical 6 oz. Dannon Vanilla, Coffee, or Fruit-on-the-Bottom yogurt (like Peach or Strawberry) has about 4 teaspoons of added sugar. “Light” yogurts swap the sugar for artificial sweeteners. (The two major brands—Yoplait and Dannon—use the questionable sweeteners acesulfame potassium and/or aspartame.)

Unsweetened yogurt has a pleasant tartness that’s a perfect foil for the natural sweetness of strawberries, bananas, or peaches, or for your favorite breakfast cereal. Greek yogurts (by companies like Fage, Dannon, Yoplait, and Chobani) add a creaminess that makes even the fat-free versions seem luxurious.

And plain yogurt has more protein, potassium, calcium, zinc, and vitamins B-6 and B-12 because it doesn’t have to share a container with the sugary fruit preserves or the sugar that’s in many flavored yogurts.

If unsweetened yogurt is still too tart for you, try mixing it with some vanilla (or other sweetened) yogurt. But why start out with all the sugar in sweetened yogurts if you don’t need to?
**Underrated**

**Watermelon**

It’s hard to find a soul, from toddler to senior, who doesn’t love the juicy sweet taste explosion set off by a bite of crisp watermelon. The next time someone tells you that they don’t like fruit, ask about watermelon.

Contrary to what most people think, watermelon is no lightweight in the nutrient department. A standard serving (about 2 cups) has 38 percent of a day’s vitamin C, 32 percent of a day’s vitamin A, and 7 percent of a day’s potassium for only 85 fat-free, salt-free calories. You won’t find two cups of many foods that go that easy on your waistline.

Bonus: watermelon is one of the “Clean 15,” the fruits and vegetables with the fewest pesticide residues, according to the Environmental Working Group. (That’s partly because the thick rind keeps out both bugs and pesticides.) And when they’re in season, watermelons are often locally grown, which means they may have a smaller carbon footprint than some other fruits.

So the next time you walk past the watermelon to get to those petite plastic containers of expensive raspberries or blueberries, don’t forget the filling, economical fruit that comes in its own container.

---

**Leafy Greens**

Yes, you’ve heard that leafy greens are nutritional superstars. But if you’re a typical American, the only greens in your grocery cart are likely to be lettuce and (maybe) spinach.

Nothing wrong with that, except that you’re missing out on powerhouse greens like kale, collards, turnip greens, mustard greens, and Swiss chard.

**Greens by any Means**

If you’re new to leafy greens, start with a mild variety like kale or collards. Mustard greens (which can be quite peppery) and beet greens and Swiss chard (with their earthy taste) have their charms, but they’re an acquired taste that can come later.

It’s easiest to buy your greens washed, chopped, and bagged. If you don’t, you’ll need to remove and discard any tough stems and center ribs, wash the leaves thoroughly to remove any sand or soil, and chop. (You should also wash the bagged greens.)

The simplest way to cook leafy greens: sauté some garlic in olive oil for a minute or two, then add the greens (still wet from washing) and cook until soft—anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes—stirring occasionally. (If you cover the pan, they’ll steam a little and cook more quickly.) Then squeeze on some lemon juice or add a splash of wine vinegar. Absolutely delish.

For variety, try sautéing them with garlic, diced tomato, chickpeas, and a pinch of red pepper flakes.

You can also steam your greens (10-15 minutes for most kinds; about half that for Swiss chard). Once they’re steamed, you can:

- stir into a pan with an onion that you’ve sautéed in olive oil until well browned (about 10 minutes), or
- stir into a pan with sliced shiitake mushroom caps that you’ve sautéed in toasted sesame oil until browned (3-5 minutes), then season with a splash of reduced-sodium soy sauce and rice or cider vinegar and a sprinkling of sesame seeds.

For a more traditional taste, simmer raw greens in low-sodium chicken stock with chunks of smoked turkey sausage until the greens are soft. You can also toss raw greens into the pot as your lentil or bean soup simmers.

Or throw away the rule book and make Crispy Kale: Toss raw kale with a little olive oil to lightly coat the leaves, spread on baking sheets, and pop in a 350˚ oven until crisp, about 15 minutes.

—Kate Sherwood