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We hope you were not one of the people who skipped Natural Products Expo West this year because you thought trade shows are on the decline. Whereas the evidence of the past few years did seem to point that way, 2011's show was spectacular.

The products on display at NatWest this year evidenced a truly refreshing new energy on the part of food & beverage processors. That energy rippled through the Anaheim Convention Center to the tune of a record 56,000 attendees.

It's difficult to sum up the trends in a handful of items, but we'll go with: aloe beverages, legumes, Greek yogurt, sunflower seeds and coconut everything.

Vis aloe, in a 2007 report in this magazine (see article [Fire Down Below](#)), we criticized aloe beverages for being overly sweetened or having texture problems. Maybe that's been fixed. Practically all of the aloe beverages encountered at the expo were tasty, refreshing and perfectly sweetened with no off texture.

The pulse of the trends

We also seemed prescient about the legume phenomenon. This year's expo featured literally dozens of products made with lentils, peas, beans and chick peas — products that included crackers, cereals, chips and hummus.

The high protein, high fiber, high resistant starch, vitamin- and mineral-loaded qualities of legumes were long overdue for application in products on these shores. As the original health food, beans and peas enjoyed popularity for, oh, about 12,000 years in the rest of the world. The arrival of other savory legume snacks showcased at Nat Expo West included Mediterranean Snack Foods Inc.'s chips, Urban Tribe's Zing Puffs and Beanfields Inc.'s bean chips, just to name a very few. Also notable was a demo product, a simple, sweet, light and crunchy dried yellow pea snack by Margaret Hughes of [Best Cooking Pulses Inc.](#), Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. This really should be a retail snack product.

"Consumers understand the value of replacing lower-quality [healthwise] whole-grain-based ingredients such as wheat and corn with the superior protein, fiber and complex carbs derived from beans and lentils," says Deepa Shenoy, CEO and founder of Mountain View, Calif.-based Please note that this information is protected under copyright laws. If more copies are required, please contact *The Fresh Ideas Group* and we will pursue reprint permission with the publication.

Pul Foods' The company makes Crunchfuls cereal, a naturally sweetened RTE cereal from bean, lentil and pea flours, plus a similarly formulated savory snack.

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For overarching trends, gluten free, after years of roller-coastering up and down, is finally on a straight-up track, with hundreds of food makers cranking out gluten-free extensions to their product lines or manufacturing nothing but. With only a few million people clinically diagnosed with Celiac Disease, the reasoning behind the rush to deglutenize might be controversial but, simply put, consumer desire for such products is widespread. Plus it complements the ancient grains boom (although not all ancient grains are gluten free). The marketability of these ingredients was evident at this year's expo with a veritable harvest of items made with kamut, quinoa, amaranth, spelt, teff, millet and chia (salba) seed.

Greek-style yogurt, too, is now pandemic, and it was hard to find a dairy manufacturer not making its own Hellenic cultured-milk gesture. So trendy is this now that one of the pioneers of the movement, Seattle-based **The Greek Gods**, positioned itself under the Hain Celestial umbrella last summer just to keep up with the huge demand. The bad news: They killed their incredible ice creams. (Baklava ice cream! Gone. Sniff.) The good news: Their yogurts are every bit as divine as ever. (The full-fat fig yogurt especially) And they've added kefir cheese (aka lebni), a sour cream-like product that will carry your taste buds to Mt. Olympus.

Several dozen makers of coconut water beverages made up just one crest of the wave of popularity for the tropical refresher. Healthwise, coconut water is rich in electrolytes and so pure as to have filled in for IV fluids. Milk, yogurt and ice cream substitutes from coconut were showcased at last year's expo. They were joined this year by several brands of coconut sugar and a number of foods touting coconut oil, once erroneously thought to be harmful to health. That the products tend to be quite nice bodes well for this trend, although there already are murmurs of demand outstripping the supply of coconuts.

Some new foods on display were downright nutty, especially where almonds are concerned. In addition to a number of new flavors of almond-based milk substitute, the healthful nuts were turned into ice cream-like desserts (Hain Celestial Group's Almond Dream brand), surprisingly good ersatz cheese (Lisanatti Foods Inc.) and even yogurt mimics (Cascade Fresh Inc.'s Amande brand).

Seeds of change

For the tree nut-avoiders, chocolate cups filled with sunflower nut butter (by Seth Ellis Chocolatiers) were heavenly in both milk and dark. What might be this writer's favorite item in the whole show was a milk substitute made from sunflower seeds. True, there are many milk substitutes out there, based on everything from soy, coconut and almonds to hemp, oats and

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hazelnuts. But the Sōl brand of sunflower "milk," developed by Fransiska Anderson of SunOpta Inc.'s Grains and Food Group, is pure genius.

Some products showcased at the expo defied categorization...but not curiosity. Fans of Dippin' Dots might be amused by Yo Drops, little freeze-dried nuggets of yogurt that look like pop rocks but without the fizzle. Unfortunately, they taste just plain weird. But San Diego-based Horizon Food Group Inc.'s [Granola Flats](#) line of sweet or savory granola crackers are positively addictive.

For dessert, let's talk dark chocolate. After the crush of studies on dark chocolate and health a few years ago, everybody and his sister began manufacturing a dark chocolate bar or putting dark chocolate in their formulations...even if it didn't belong. Great for chocoholics.

This year, nearly two rows of exhibitors showcased an array of chocolates, and the dark offerings were superb. No more chalky texture, no more harsh bitterness. Dark isn't milk, but some brands had chocolate bars with cocoa percentages in the 70s and even 80s that had a delicate, sultry and velvety flavor with transcendent melt-in-your-mouth qualities.