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Natural Products Expo 2011 Report: Functional Food and Sustainable Packages

by Roberta Cruger, Los Angeles on 03.14.11

Food & Health



Cardboard Cafe at Expo West being recycled. Photos by RCruiger

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Ancient grains, coconut water, fair trade chocolates, protein bars, and organic pet food were in abundance in Orange County this weekend, where baobab and sea buckthorn joined [acai](#), goji berry and [chia seeds](#), the reigning antioxidant-rich superfoods. In an overwhelming display across 3,000 booths, the exhibit floor of enticing organic foods, healthy items and green goods at the annual [Natural Products Expo West](#) convention and conference, March 10-13, seemed like all the world eats well and lives sustainably. But then reality struck.



More than 56,000 gathered for this 31st fest, with an increased visibility on non-GMO foods and eco-packaging. With aisle after aisle of vendors from Nature's Path to Earth Balance, from omega-rich supplements to "pure" and "smart" items, it's clear the message was healthy and environmental. Compared to two years ago, it was hard to find a [plastic bottled water](#) booth, through other drinks overflowed from teas to brain tonics, digestive beverages to chillout elixirs.

It's a far cry from the "Birkenstock crowd," said someone who's attended the show for years. [Kamut](#), introduced here 25 years ago, is now in dozens of products from cereal to pasta, and pastas are made with kelp and kale. If last year's Natural Products Expo displayed an endless array of snacks, from baked sweet potato crisps to popped fruit chips, this year an overriding theme was beverages with benefits.



Numi Tea display with new look and minimal brick packaging.

Companies trotted out their latest goods and the new products section expanded with a dizzying array. Some of the most inspiring items were created by people who have been transformed by a life-changing incident: a new baby, an illness or an epiphany that motivated them to discover a solution and invent a 'cure' for the kitchen to the bath - MagNoodles with veggies, Seaweed Baths for psoriasis sufferers, Orgain nutritional shakes for kids.

Beyond Boulder, Berkeley, Burlington

At the state of the industry seminar, Patrick Rea, publisher of the *Nutrition Business Journal* spoke to the future of natural foods. Yet despite progress, a study done across the county in 1000 homes, beyond the eco-bubble of Boulder, Berkeley, Burlington, offered sobering testimonies from families with only Walmarts and fast food chains for miles. There's big bucks behind selling junk food and getting people addicted to sugar and fat. The good news is that "natural products" are a \$110 billion industry and growing. So it's hard to imagine it still only accounts for four percent of the market in the U.S.



Superfood display for chia seeds at Expo West 2011.

At the "Ingredients for Change" luncheon, a panel of speakers addressed feeding kids and children. [Dr. Alan Greene](#), pediatrician and author of *Raising Baby Green*, unveiled his "[White Out](#)" campaign to switch a baby's first bite of food from processed white rice cereal (98% of infants) to a more nutritious food. The Expo had plenty to choose from or just mash-up mom's peas.

[Chef Ann Cooper](#), the [Renegade Lunch Lady](#), author of *Lunch Lessons* and founder of Food, Family and Farming Foundation Chef spoke of the necessity of feeding kids a nutritional meal -- challenging on less than \$2 per day. She provides recipes and installs [Salad Bars in Schools](#) school cafeterias.

The head of Stonyfield Farm, makers of organic dairy goods, and author of *Stirring It Up: How to Make Money and Save the World*, Gary Hirshberg, gave more sobering stats concerning toxins, new pro-GMO laws, [gigantic pesticide-resistant superweeds](#) and how it all affects organic farming.

Attention: Frozen Yogurt Shops of America

Above the buzz on the exhibit floor were informative panels, from Food Safety to Sustainable Packaging, where [GreenBlue's](#) Katherine O'Dea indicated there probably is no truly sustainable packaging but there are great steps forward. One highlight used at the Stonyfield booth was the clever [EcoTaster](#), a mini paperboard spoon created to end single-use plastic spoons. Recyclable, stackable, compostable, and made of FSC paperboard with minimal material, the creation by Peggy Cross, a former packaging designer intends to reduce the 40 billion plastic utensils that end up in landfill each year.

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Paper Eco-Taster to end plastic single spoon usage with green designer.

Winner of the Expo East in Boston last fall, she also designed SpoonLidz for the tops of yogurt containers and EcoSpoon. Hopefully more tasters at Expo 2012 will switch.

One of the big hits of this event was [Seventh Generation's](#) new cardboard bottle for its Natural 4X Laundry Detergent. Designed with Ecologic Brands, it features a recyclable and compostable outer shell of recycled newspapers and cardboard and a recyclable monopolymer film pouch inside with no nylon or laminates. It reduces the plastic by 66 percent and when empty, it's stackable. so nine times more efficient to ship.



New recycled cardboard "bottle" with film pouch in markets March 16.

This container was created by Julie Corbett, a Canadian inspired by her childhood growing up with milk pouches inserted in a carafe she handmade. Look for "moving the needle" with dairy packaging soon. All the boxes from the vendors' organic chips, vegan dips and tea drinks at the conference will be reused for the next batch of Seventh Generation "bottles."

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