

Alt Meat

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Healthy skepticism

Scientist and entrepreneur
Ricardo San Martin approaches the
cultivated meat sector with a critical eye.



Photos Courtesy of Trader Joe's (c)2022

The best meat that isn't meat I've ever had'

OUR TASTE TESTERS WERE SPLIT ON TRADER JOE'S TURKEYLESS GROUND. SOME LOVED THAT IT COOKED UP LIKE 'REAL' TURKEY, WHILE OTHERS COMPLAINED THAT THE TEXTURE WAS TOO MUSHY AND THE NUTRITION DIDN'T STACK UP TO TRADITIONAL GROUND TURKEY

On a recent grocery store excursion, always on the lookout for new alt-meat items, we discovered Trader Joe's Turkeyless Ground. Labeled both 'vegan' and 'plant-based' on the package front to appeal to a wide audience, Turkeyless Ground is described on TJ's website as "a superbly savory protein that evokes the flavor, texture and, with 21 grams per serving, protein content of ground turkey." Featuring a blend of pea protein and textured wheat protein, it is meant to be used just like "real" ground turkey.

Turkeyless Ground is housed in TJ's refrigerated section but you don't have to go too far deep into the display to find some that are still half or fully frozen since, like many other ground "meat" products, it's shipped to the stores frozen. We purposely purchased our Turkeyless Ground frozen since some packages did not have

"Use By" date stickers on them. We were anxious to find out what our taste testers thought about this new alt-meat "turkey" item.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Tasters included some who are consciously consuming less "real" meat, a few who are purposely seeking alt-meat options, flexitarians, a vegetarian and a vegan.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

"It's not labeled as 'seasoned,' but the ingredient label states it has salt, pepper, garlic, paprika and more in it," indicated a female taster.

Our couple told us, "It looked too finely ground, was slimy to touch and smelled like soy protein, not turkey."

"The packaging was a little boring compared to some of the other plant-based 'meat' alter-

Taste Test



PRODUCT:

Trader Joe's
Turkeyless Ground

PRICE:

\$5.49/12-oz. package (3
servings)

NUTRITION PER SERVING:

Calories 230, Total Fat 12g, Saturated Fat 5g, Cholesterol
0mg, Sodium 440mg, Total Carbohydrate 11g, Protein 21g.

natives I've tried so far. The cooking directions were easy to find and follow.”

Our vegan observed, “Once it was thawed, the consistency was a bit off-putting, probably because it resembled real meat.”

“I liked that it clearly said ‘vegan’ and ‘plant-based’ and provided the protein amount right on the front. The ‘turkey’ looked just like ground turkey from back when I ate meat,” explained our vegetarian.

APPEARANCE, FEEL, TASTE & TEXTURE

“I thought the color and texture looked like tuna salad,” indicated a curious taster with a plant-based diet. “It wasn’t appetizing-looking at all. I expected it to look like extruded ‘real’ turkey does.”

Our vegetarian said, “It definitely became more appealing as I cooked it up, and I don’t think I would be able to tell the difference between ‘real’ turkey and this side-by-side. I cooked it up in a taco recipe I had. I wish it was a little firmer, but I still enjoyed it in my tacos.”

“I created a skillet dish, just like I do with traditional ground turkey, sauteing onion, carrot and seasonings with the ‘turkey’ in a little vegetable oil. But even in a non-stick skillet, the ‘turkey’ stuck to the skillet and never really turned golden,” explained a taster. “Instead, it either looked uncooked or burnt. The texture was just too soft and my dish was not as flavorful as when I make it with ‘real’ turkey. It was bland.”

A pescatarian who was interested in trying the product told us, “I very much enjoyed this. I sauteed it with taco seasoning and ate it over a salad with rice. It cooked up like ‘real’ ground

turkey and the mouthfeel was also similar to ‘real’ ground turkey.”

A female taste-tester shared, “It tasted good ‘straight up’ when cooked, but my issue was the amount of salt. It messed up my ability to add my usual taco seasonings. It makes it hard to treat it like a package of traditional ground beef or turkey in recipes. I even saved some and made a rice dish with it so that it could bring down the overall sodium level.”

“We used it in tacos and grilled burgers and it was inedible,” shared our husband-and-wife tasters. “It had a slimy, mushy texture. A soy taste overpowered, although it does not contain soy, and it had a strong ‘off’ flavor. Nutritionally, it’s poor relative to ‘real’ ground turkey with double the saturated fat. Why is there even saturated fat in a turkey-less product? And much more sodium. The price seems on par with other alt-meat ground ‘meat’ products, but we found this product significantly worse.”

A male in his early 20’s, who walked into the kitchen while his mom was cooking, assumed it was “real” turkey based on cooked appearance and taste before being seasoned. Not believing his mom when she said it wasn’t turkey, he had to be shown the package. He said, “That’s the best meat thing that isn’t meat that I’ve ever had!”

Our vegan provided an enlightening perspective, saying, “It was almost like I was actually cooking meat. But since I’m vegan, I don’t like to do that — it grosses me out. It mentally made me feel like I was eating meat, even though I knew I wasn’t. And the fat-like consistency, which I find unappealing in meat imitation products, made



I don’t think I would be able to tell the difference between ‘real’ turkey and this side-by-side.



it stick to the knife. I wonder how that 12 grams of fat and 5 grams of saturated fat are sticking to my digestive system and arteries? But it did cook up nicely and had a good flavor, which truly held an essence of 'meat'."

CONCLUSION

One taster concluded, "This was the least objectionable faux meat I have ever had."

Our vegetarian determined, "I can see keeping it in the freezer for when I need something quick to cook or when I don't want to use fake beef. This was the first time I used a turkey alternative, and I have a few ideas of other recipes to try!"

"I would definitely buy this to have in the freezer. I prefer this to most frozen ground not-beef," noted our pescatarian.

"I think because I had to cook this product from



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Taste Test

scratch, I was too aware of its imitation meat characteristics and therefore unable to embrace the true flavor and essence of the product,” explained our vegan. “It reminded me of what I don’t like about cooking and eating meat because of its authenticity.”

“I feel good about eating ‘real’ turkey because, in my mind, it’s healthy. So, this turkeyless ground doesn’t give me a reason to purchase, especially since it didn’t taste better.”

Our couple said “There’s no nutritional benefit to this versus ‘real’ ground turkey, and we found it to be the worst alt-protein product we’ve come across. Definitely not worth buying.”

TJ’s Turkeyless Ground met some of our tasters’ expectations, while for others it just didn’t deliver on the taste and texture. While the majority of our tasters prefer and look for analogues that closely resemble or mimic their traditional counterparts, we truly appreciated our vegan’s comments noting that mimicry is not what she is looking for in a product.

Regardless, alt-meat products need to taste good. Manufacturers and processors need to keep working toward product improvements so that, as consumers experiment, they begin to feel confident about the alt-meat product they’re purchasing, knowing it tastes good.

by Anna Marie Cesario and
Jennifer Vahalik, U&I Collaboration, LLC.

Food product development and consumer research veterans, Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, join Alt-Meat magazine as contributors to our regular “Taste Test” column. Here’s how the program works: The alternative meat item is distributed to consumers, including the core demographic, for preparation in their own homes. No instructions are provided to the consumer, other than to write their overall impressions of the product, as well as to evaluate the flavor, texture, packaging and ease of use. Cesario and Vahalik look for common threads by using Getting It!®, a system developed to listen to consumers about products. The sample of people is not intended to be a “taste test” in a controlled setting, nor is it intended to simulate a focus group. Others are doing both. Rather, the intent is to interpret the response of the people who might purchase a product like this and use it, simply based on their encounters with the product in their individual, unique home environment. That is how U&I has been developing cutting-edge product and people understanding since 1999.

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