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Ball Park's new hot dog avoids extreme opinions — good or bad.

Photo by Getty



## PRODUCT

Ball Park Nacho Cheese Franks

## PRICE

\$3.58/15-oz. package (8 franks)

## PLUS

Unique flavor

## PROBLEM

Weak cheese filling

A whopping 20 billion franks — yes, that's billion! — are consumed in the U.S. each year, according to the National Hot Dog and Sausage Council. It's one of those classic foods that people enjoy in a variety of ways, often with an array of personalized toppings. They're also more inexpensive than many other meat choices in today's economic environment. Ball Park,

the most popular hot dog brand in the U.S., recently introduced nacho cheese franks that are “new and improved with more cheese,” and “crafted with a blend of chicken and pork.” We knew we had to give these hot dogs a try.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Our hot dog tasters included a preschooler, a few teens and a variety of adults who all enjoy a good hot dog.

### FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND APPEARANCE

Our tasters were full of intrigue in their first interaction with Ball Park nacho cheese franks.

“Ball Park all beef hot dogs are my favorite, so I was eager to try this,” one taster stated. Other remarks included, “Why are these made with chicken and pork instead of all beef?” and “I wonder if the cheese will ooze out when I cook it?”

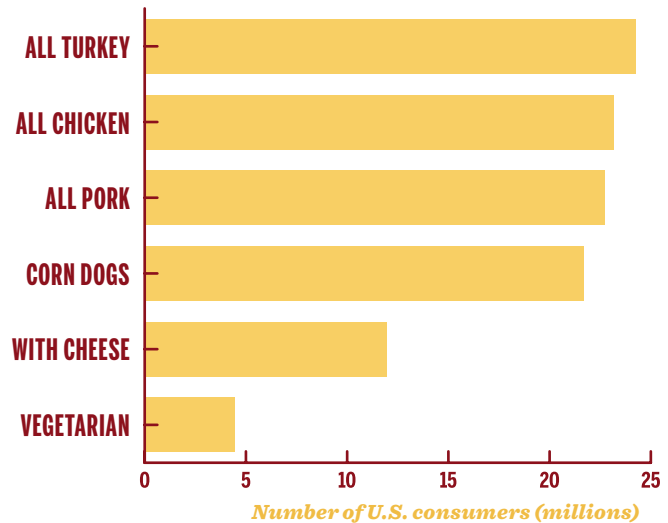
On the packaging end, a taster observed, “Spend the money and put a zipper closure on the packaging,” while another stated, “It was a bit of a pain to open, and I eventually had to get a knife after not being able to pull it apart.”

When it came to the product's appearance, three tasters were surprised at the consistency of its cheese filling.

# Beef ALTERNATIVES

Among non-beef hot dogs, turkey is the most popular protein for U.S. consumers. According to a Statista analysis, turkey is consumed by 24.26 million Americans, ahead of chicken, pork, corn dogs, and cheese-filled hot dogs. Of course, even when combined, those varieties pale in comparison to the nearly 200 million consumers who prefer all-beef hot dogs.

Source: Statista



“Uncooked, it looked like a normal hot dog,” one taster reflected. “I don’t really see any cheese. But after cooking in a pan with bacon grease, it looks very good. It got a nice dark color with gooey cheese oozing out.”

The second taster shared, “The cheese is apparent throughout the hot dog from end-to-end, but not like a line through the middle — almost like it was extruded all together,” while the third stated, “I expected a cheese center like a Twinkie, but that’s not how it is.”

## TASTE, TEXTURE AND MORE

A number of tasters were positive about their eating experience with the Ball Park nacho cheese hot dogs.

“The texture was the same as a (beef) hot dog, and the cheese sauce wasn’t too messy,” one taster remarked. “The taste seemed closer to a sausage than a hot dog — maybe it was the flavor of the cheese mixed with the meat.”

Another taster praised the “great flavor,” adding, “they were juicy and crisped up just the right amount on the outside. They

plumped up to nearly twice their size.”

While one taster’s kids hoped for more cheese filing, the taster said, “It was still a good amount, and it was evenly distributed inside. Compared to the regular hot dogs we also made, the Ball Park cheese dogs were favored by far.”

The hot dog’s flavor profile, though, did not connect with an equal number of tasters.

For one, the chicken/pork blend (rather than beef) provided “a different texture and taste which we didn’t care for. It tasted as if processed cheese was ground into the meat.”

Indeed, the hot dog’s cheese proved the most divisive aspect. One taster shared, “We didn’t really taste any nacho cheese at all,” while another stated, “When just on a bun, I don’t get as much chili cheese flavor as just eating the hot dog by itself.”

A third taster shared that mustard and relish “overwhelmed” the cheese flavor, and while eating a plain, microwaved dog did provide the flavor, they still were “not sure that it’s ‘nacho.’”

One other taster also reported differ-

ing flavors based on the product’s preparation. The boiled plain hot dog, they reported, tasted “chemical,” while grilled with a bun “is better.”

## UPSHOT

A few tasters were unabashedly positive about the Ball Park franks.

“I thought they were very good and something I would definitely have again!” one shared. “Even my 3-year-old ate one, so he likes them too!”

A second taster praised the “unique flavor,” with a third also receiving the critical child endorsement:



# TASTE *test*

“My son liked them so much that he requested I buy them again.”

Other tasters were positive, but more measured. One saw the nacho cheese flavor as a “change of pace for a barbecue,” but was “not sure” if they would “buy them just for me.” On that same note, a different taster reflected, “For the price, I would definitely buy them in the summer when I usually grill and eat

hot dogs, even though I wouldn’t be buying them for the taste.”

Finally, some tasters were pointed in their critiques.

“These were not fully loaded with cheese, so the description doesn’t fit,” a taster elaborated. “I grilled them as I thought it would give a better flavor, but it just tasted like a bland chicken dog. We didn’t get past the first bite.”

*“I grilled them as I thought it would give a better flavor, but it just tasted like a bland chicken dog.”*

Another critic shared, “They say it’s ‘new and improved with more cheese flavor,’ but it still doesn’t deliver a lot, especially with condiments on a bun ... the world could probably live without this variety.”

And one more taster reflected on the

hot dog’s limited use for meals.

“I would not buy it because we don’t eat plain hot dogs — we always eat chili cheese dogs, so it might as well be a plain hot dog when we eat it that way,” they said. “I can’t see myself changing my behavior

and suddenly doing hot dogs plain.”

### CONCLUSION

Seems like there could be a “fun factor” associated with these new Ball Park nacho franks which some found appealing, making them want to eat these for a change-

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# TASTE *test*

of pace or to add some fun and excitement to their next barbecue or get together. Comments about the flavor varied from bland to definitely noticeable, depending on cooking method

and how they were eaten, specifically the type and number of toppings. But it appears that many of us would have been just as happy with the plain Ball Park cheese frank we fondly

*“They were juicy and crisped up just the right amount on the outside.”*

remember. Those who enjoyed the plain cheese frank, and then tried these nacho cheese franks, are asking for the

return of their cheese variety via reviews on the Ball Park website. Perhaps repeat sales, or lack thereof, will determine whether

we see a return of the plain cheese franks, or perhaps a lineup of multiple “cheese lovers” varieties on the shelf.

by **Jacqueline Beckley, The Understanding & Insight Group, and Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, U&I Collaboration LLC**

Food product development and consumer research veterans, Jacqueline Beckley, Anna Marie Cesario and Jennifer Vahalik, join Meatingplace Magazine as regular contributors to MeatingTaste, a consumer sampling of new products featured in our monthly Taste Test column. Here's how the program works: The meat item is distributed to consumers, including the core demographic, for preparation in their own houses. 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. Beckley, 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.

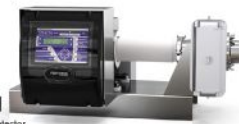
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