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December 2023 | www.alt-meat.net



MUSHROOMS ALL THE WAY DOWN

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“A big letdown”

Many hunt not only for convenient meal options — often with a focus on well-being — but also for exciting flavor adventures. The frozen happi foodi Plant Based Shawarma Bowl seemed to fit this desire so we were anxious to have our taste-testers give it a try.

Made with “wholesome ingredients,” including eggplant, cauliflower, quinoa, brown rice, toasted sesame seeds, meatless crumbles and shawarma sauce, the microwavable single-serving bowl packs in 11 grams of protein per serving.

Let’s see what our taste-testers thought about this “chef-inspired comfort food” with an “internationally inspired sauce.”

DEMOGRAPHICS

This product was prepared and eaten at home by a vegan, a pescatarian, a few long-time vegetarians, several declared flexitarians and others who are open to new food experiences with plant-based foods.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

“I was really looking forward to trying this as it’s food I enjoy but don’t get to have as much as I’d like to,” shared a vegetarian taster. “The box is bright, and I liked that it advertised that it’s plant-based, plus the grams of protein and the calories right on the front of the box. I felt like 11g of protein and 220 calories for the meal seemed like a decent number. I don’t typically eat a lot of frozen meals, but I do appreciate it when I can get one with a decent amount of protein and lower calories.”

“I liked the simple colors on the packaging and the large, clear picture of the product,” said a vegetarian. She continued, “There was a clear overview of ingredients on the front with the important nutrition facts highlighted along the top of the package.”

Our vegan told us, “My first impression of the packaging is that this is a healthy product that boasts a substantial amount of protein,

OUR TASTE TESTERS OFFERED OVERWHELMINGLY NEGATIVE REVIEWS OF HAPPI FOODI PLANT BASED SHAWARMA BOWL. THOUGH IT LOOKED APPETIZING ON THE BOX, MOST TASTERS FOUND THE FLAVOR TO BE OVERPOWERING AND UNPLEASANT.



PRODUCT:

happi foodi Plant Based Shawarma Bowl

PRICE:

\$5.25/9.5-oz. package (1 serving)

NUTRITION PER SERVING:

Calories 220, Total Fat 7g, Saturated Fat 0g, Cholesterol 0mg, Sodium 840mg, Total Carbohydrate 37g, Protein 11g.

and the ingredients appear to be clean via the vibrant image on the front of the package. On closer inspection of the actual ingredients listed on the back of the package, though, I was displeased to see that there are a lot of faux meat terminologies in use, and the ‘real’ ingredients (eggplant, brown rice and so on) are toward the end of the list. The last thing that I was looking for but could not find on the packaging was if the plastic coating on the included bowl was BPA-free. This is a big ‘no’ in my book, because I do not want to ingest toxins with my foods.”

An adventurous eater shared, “Love the idea of ethnic foods and trying something that I probably won’t cook, especially as a lunch for one.”

A plant-based-only eater explained, “I would say this isn’t a product that I would gravitate toward just based on looking at the package. Also, I don’t know what shawarma is; I’ve never even heard of it. I read the description and thought it sounded interesting, but I don’t think I would have purchased this without being prompted.”

APPEARANCE, FEEL, TASTE AND TEXTURE

A vegetarian told us, “The picture on the front of the box looked super tasty. Of course, frozen meals never really capture the same look as the box. I was still pleased that it was a decent-sized bowl, and I could easily see nice big chunks of cauliflower mixed in with the quinoa. The other items, like the eggplant and meatless crumbles, were a little tougher to pick out.”

An adventurous male taster commented, “I took the package out, and it did not look appetizing. The sauce was stuck to the top, and just

looked like a brown smudge.”

Another adventurous eater shared, “Smells strongly of allspice which is not in my (homemade) shawarma recipe. The sauce is bitter, and I don’t think it tastes like shawarma at all. The cauliflower is the only thing with any texture. The meatless crumbles were hard to find once stirred up, and the ones I found just tasted like the sauce. The crumbles don’t have any obnoxious underlying flavor like some of the big-name faux meats. Tastes better with tzatziki sauce, which is how I usually eat shawarma and it mellows out the spices of the sauce.”

Our pescatarian pointed out, “There were some big cauliflower pieces on top, but they were limp, and the grain mix was mushy. It was too spicy for me, and I didn’t like the taste.”

Another taster explained, “It has the potential to be good because I like all of the ingredients, but I just don’t like the flavoring and spices. I can’t eat more than a few bites because the flavor is too strong. I would rather the eggplant and the meatless meat have more flavor.”

Our vegan said, “I prepared my bowl by taking the contents out of the packaging and putting it on a microwave-safe plate with a paper towel over it (to avoid splatter). As I said earlier, I do not wish to ingest melted plastic or BPA in my food, if given the choice. I heated it for four minutes in the microwave, and that did the trick. The food tasted good and had the right amount of spice. The cauliflower was firm and not mushy and even the eggplant was OK in texture. The rice and quinoa mixture was great. The only thing that was odd was that even though the sodium level is high at 840 mg, I found that I needed to add salt! This

really should not be the case, and it was only after I added the salt that I was able to truly enjoy the bowl.”

“The appearance was off-putting after microwaving,” explained a vegetarian. “The individual ingredients were not as easy to see as they were in the picture on the packaging. I liked the taste, but there was a strong aftertaste of a spice I didn’t like. I liked the overall hot spiciness of it, but the warm spices were too strong. The texture overall was a bit soft.”

An open-minded female described, “I only microwaved for five minutes, but there were very strong aromatics coming out of the microwave. The food was dry on my tongue from a spice that

was very bitter. I’m not sure what it is. The meal looks like brown mush even before I stir it. The meat crumbles look OK, and the cauliflower is a nice size and has texture. But I feel like it needs some fat to balance out the bitter flavors. The sodium is high for this small amount of food, yet it seems like it could use a pinch of salt.”

A female who buys and enjoys plant-based foods occasionally shared, “The bowl was a taste that I have never experienced before. I’m assuming that was the shawarma sauce, which I didn’t like. The veggies, quinoa, rice and meatless crumbles were fine, but the sauce was so overpowering that my mouth was tingling, and I couldn’t



get the taste out for a while.”

Our vegetarian shared, “It was nice to have something quick to throw in the microwave for a fast lunch. I enjoyed the flavor but felt like it was a

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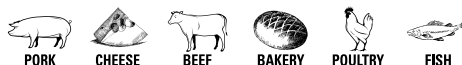
**Toll Free:
800.336.3936**

3224 Butler Avenue
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Taste Test



bit overly spiced. And the texture was too much all the same. There was nothing to break the monotony of the softer textures. I honestly would have had no idea there were meatless crumbles in there if I had not read the box.

The flavor and texture of the crumbles completely blended in with the rest of the bowl, and I don't feel like they added anything to the meal."

"Within a minute in the microwave, the bowl made the entire kitchen smell," stated a male taster. "It did not look or smell good. I took a few bites, but I wasn't a fan. The flavoring was powerful, but they were not flavors I enjoy."

"I thought it smelled good but once I tasted it, I didn't want to continue eating it beyond two bites," explained a plant-based-only eater. "The flavor was pretty strong. I thought maybe it needed salt but when I saw the sodium levels, I didn't want to add more."

CONCLUSION

"I enjoyed that this was something different than what I usually get

to eat, and the flavors were really vibrant," concluded our vegetarian. "However, based on the price, I probably wouldn't go out of my way to purchase this again. I'm not someone who buys a lot of frozen meals, mostly because I don't like the high levels of sodium and carbs in most of them. But I hope to see more food like this in the grocery store."

An overall food lover decided, "This is just too bitter from too many spices. I always wonder if the developer ever sat down to eat a full bowl. I would not buy this again, even though the concept intrigued me."

A vegetarian concluded, "I would not buy this again based on taste, but I would look to see if there were other flavors to try."

"I wouldn't ever purchase this, and honestly, I do like plant-based food," said a taster. "I was excited to try this as I love veggies, rice and quinoa, but this was a big letdown."

An adventurous taster, noted, "The sauce is bitter, and I'm disappointed with the amount of sodium. I would not buy it again."

Our plant-based-only eater, concluded, "I have to be brutally honest and tell you that I did not like this meal at all. I feel bad giving this feedback. I love trying new things, and I love all the plant-based options that are available right now, but this one just wasn't my cup of tea."

Our flexitarian explained, "This could have been an alternative for lunch, but I don't like how spice-forward it is. I wouldn't buy it again."

Our vegan said, "I would not buy this product because the only way to cook it is to microwave it, I have to take it out of the packaging to cook it (not convenient) and it is not as 'healthy' as one might think due to faux meat and other additives."

"This is just not something I would purchase, but that could be because I'm not a fan of these flavors," shared a male taster.

Though some people are looking for bold flavors, sometimes flavors can be too overpowering... and perhaps too authentic, as well.

Many consumers seek a somewhat "safe adventure" that can be delivered by providing a twist on the familiar. But it seems like this shawarma bowl ventured a bit too far for most.

Ironically, there were few comments about the meatless crumbles, probably because they blended in texturally with the medley of other soft-textured ingredients.

Perhaps happi foodi can improve this culinary adventure by balancing out or toning down the spices to appeal to a more mainstream audience, and by improving the texture of the ingredients to provide some diversity. But, as we know, you never get a second chance to make a first impression.

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.