

# Alt-Meat®

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## EXTRACELLULAR matrix

Michael Selden on building a cultivated tuna company –  
and the alt-protein community as a whole.





Photos Courtesy of Nasoya

# Gummy Steak

**G**round beef alternatives have been around for a number of years, but plant-based “steak” is relatively new. Nasoya now sells its refrigerated Plantspired Plant-based Steak with a Korean BBQ Flavor that is marketed as “vegan” and “made with non-GMO ingredients.” It delivers 14g plant protein.

Many of our tasters expressed interest in trying a plant-based steak, so let’s see what their thoughts were after cooking and tasting these “tender, sliced meatless steak-like strips.”

## DEMOGRAPHICS

Our taste-testers included a vegan, a pescatarian, a vegetarian, several declared flexitarians

and others who are open to new experiences with plant-based foods.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

“The packaging was nice and bright and caught my eye. There were clear cooking instructions along with the nutritional facts. I love when products show nutrition for both a ‘single serving’ and the ‘entire package’ since more often than not I eat the entire package,” a thirty-something male taster shared.

“I would prefer it to be frozen instead of refrigerated,” explained a vegan taster. “It is more appetizing when ‘faux’ meat products are sold frozen in order to guarantee freshness. I

**OUR TASTE TESTERS GAVE MIXED REVIEWS OF NASOYA PLANTSPIRED PLANT-BASED STEAK. THOUGH IT LOOKED APPETIZING AND COOKED UP EASILY, MANY TASTERS FELT THE PRODUCT’S TEXTURE DIDN’T DELIVER.**



## PRODUCT:

Nasoya Plantspired Plant-based Steak – Korean BBQ Flavor

## PRICE:

\$5.99-7.99/7-oz. package  
(2.5 servings)

## NUTRITION PER SERVING:

Calories 200, Total Fat 10g, Saturated Fat 1.5g, Cholesterol 0mg, Sodium 520mg, Total Carbohydrate 13g, Protein 14g.

appreciate that it is marketed as being made with ‘only four core ingredients,’ yet when I look at the list there are eight lines of items. Seems deceiving to me. The package was attractive, and having eaten Nasoya Tofu and Deli Meats, I felt comfortable delving into the product.”

A husband-and-wife duo told us, “It needs a resealable closure since everyone may not use it all at once. And it needs to tell you how long it can be kept refrigerated after opening.”

A 47-year-old female who is a fan of plant-based items told us, “I love items made with non-GMO ingredients that are vegan and easy to heat up.”

A millennial male noted, “I’m concerned that sugar is the first ingredient in the sauce, and it appears again as caramelized sugar syrup and maltodextrin.”

Our vegetarian commented, “I was intrigued by the plant-based steak since I haven’t tried any. I was never really a steak fan when I ate meat but I’ve been interested in trying a plant-based version. The packaging made the ‘meat’ look appetizing, and I like how they called it ‘plantspired’.”

### APPEARANCE, FEEL, TASTE AND TEXTURE

“When I first opened the package there was a strong artificial smoke aroma, which I did not like,” noted a female taster.

Our 30-something male said, “I feel like these companies haven’t quite nailed down the ‘resealable’ function.” He continued, “When I opened the package the smell was a bit strong and seemed similar to a ‘Korean BBQ’ aroma, but wasn’t the most appetizing to me.”

Our vegan taster commented, “The product



had an appealing color, but the small pieces and their visually perceived texture was off-putting. Once cooked, it appeared to be a puffed piece of flavored food and did not possess the ‘gristle’ of meat. I liked the taste, but the rubberiness of the texture was unappetizing.”

A millennial male told us, “The flavor and chew are decent. It reminds me of a jerky flavor. The exterior and mouthfeel of the bite are impressive. The outside has a meat quality but the

inside is mushy. It's not thick, which is good, and it looks like grilled meat."

Our husband and wife tasted the steak over a salad, which they often do. The wife shared, "It has some chew, and there's no 'dusty' aftertaste which is common with pea protein." Her husband added, "It has no texture or structure. It's soft and spongy. It's too lean for a steak. The flavors are too strong and linger way too long."

"I pan-fried it with peppers and onions, adding a little water," explained a 47-year-old female. "I put it over white rice, which was definitely a game-changer. It was flavorful and I got the Korean BBQ smoky taste. It's a good source of protein but it did give

me a little bit of indigestion directly after I ate it."

"I tried some in an air fryer and then a batch in the toaster oven. I preferred the oven because it seemed too fake out of the air fryer, although the textures were similar. The taste was good and flavorful, but biting into the steak, I found the texture most unappealing," explained a vegan.

"I prepared it both in the microwave and on top of the stove. In the pan, it looks just like strips of steak and sears and browns just like 'real' steak. What bothered me was the texture. I am particular about 'real' meat texture, and although this came close, it was not a texture I liked. The outside was seared,

almost crunchy, which was good, but the inside was soft. However, the strips each had a different chew. Some were soft with a tough section, almost as if I was biting into a little muscle," shared a flexitarian.

"I had it with some brown rice in a wrap, kind of like a burrito. It was a bit rubbery and had the texture of a lower grade meat. I was indifferent to the taste. It was just OK," explained our 30-something male.

"The texture and consistency of 'real' steak is something I never liked. This looked pretty similar to typical steak, but not enough that it grossed me out," shared a vegetarian. "I had a hard time eating it at first because



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## Taste Test

of how it felt in my mouth. I cooked it with a bit of oil in a frying pan, and it cooked up quickly and easily. I actually really enjoyed how it was flavored with the Korean BBQ, but unfortunately, I just did not like the texture of the steak at all. Even after I browned the meat well, the inside was gummy and not pleasant to chew or swallow. I had big texture issues with 'real' steak because of similar chewiness, depending on how it was prepared, and this was way too similar to me."

### CONCLUSION

"It was quick and easy to make, which I like, but I probably won't go out of my way to buy more," concluded a 30-something male.

"The texture and visuals are very much there. They're close to 'real' meat," explained our millennial male. "But is it worth it to eat all of these ingredients instead of just eating a natural form of protein?"

A female concluded, "I wouldn't buy it again as the consistency of the plant-based beef is definitely a little rubbery and squishy in your mouth. Other plant-based meat products I've had do not have this consistency."

"Texture-wise, I think the company got it incorrect," noted our vegan taster. "They could integrate mushrooms into the ingredients, which might have jacked up the price but would have perfected the texture and



improved the nutritional value. As a vegan, I have learned to look for soy protein isolate as an ingredient that is processed and not the best for my body. I would not buy this product but I do recommend the organic tofu that Nasoya makes."

Our vegetarian concluded, "I just couldn't get over the gummy texture. It was really unappetizing, though the flavor of was pretty good otherwise. I would not purchase this in the future."

Even though the majority of tasters found the idea of a plant-based steak appealing, the texture was something

that they couldn't get past. Whether it was too close to "real" steak for our vegetarian or too "squishy," it just didn't make it past the chew test.

Who should alt-meat manufacturers be innovating for? They have a conundrum: Should a plant-based steak product eat like "real" steak or not? The interest in a plant-based steak seems to be there, but this particular execution did not live up to our tasters' expectations, supporting claims that alternative meat companies need to improve textural issues and clean up the ingredient listing.

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.