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# Health watch: Maze of milks

## Plant-based milks flood the market. Can they replace the real thing?

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By Susan Taylor, Special to Tribune Newspapers  
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Plant-based milks flood the market. Can they replace the real thing?

Myriad milk drinks are elbowing their way into dairy cases and onto shelves in mainstream markets across the country. This is good news for consumers who, for whatever reason, want to reduce the amount of dairy in their diet and don't like soy milk.

But the number of choices can be mind-boggling. In addition to almond milk, the most popular new variety in the category, you can find milk made from rice, coconut, oatmeal, hazelnut and even hemp.

Many of these varieties also have "light," chocolate and vanilla options. Do these ersatz milks taste like milk? Do they deliver the same nutrition as milk? Can you use them in recipes that call for milk? Do they foam the same way as dairy milk when used in espresso drinks?

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Almond milk, with its lightly toasted almond flavor, has gained a whopping 86 percent in the category since the beginning of the year, according to Information Resources Inc., an industry tabulator. It's easy to understand why: Almond milk tastes really good and feels creamy. It "takes a familiar ingredient and

uses it in an unfamiliar way, which takes the mystery out of the category," said Brooke Hansen, the brand manager of Silk, which makes Pure Almond.

HealthCastle.com, an online nutrition network of registered dietitians, recently published an analysis of 45 animal and plant-based milk products designed to help consumers navigate the maze of milks. According to Editor-in-Chief Gloria Tsang, "in the U.S., when we talk about milk, we're referring to cow's milk. I don't have to tell my daughter, 'Let's drink cow's milk.' Cow's milk is the cultural standard."

So, when looking to replace the milk in our diets with a nondairy version, Tsang suggested it provide similar nutritional content. "To be considered a good source of calcium, a product must contain at least 20 percent of the daily value for calcium per serving. Cow's milk has 28 percent," she said.

To make matters more confusing, there are numerous brands of each type of milk, and they taste somewhat different. Most are fortified to have equal calcium to cow's milk, but many fall short in protein by comparison. Most contain fewer calories and most have less fat than dairy milk, with the notable exception of coconut milk, which contains saturated fat.

"Light" versions of these milks don't taste as good because they're watered down and save only 30 or so calories. Vanilla- or chocolate-flavored versions contain more sugar than the "original" versions. And plant-based milk is considerably more expensive than dairy milk.

Many mainstream groceries sell some varieties of plant-based milk from their refrigerated dairy cases. Groceries with a more comprehensive selection also sell them in aseptic containers from non-refrigerated shelves. These remain shelf-stable for a year and should be refrigerated and consumed seven to 10 days after opening.

The industry touts these milk drinks as all-purpose replacements for dairy milk, but you'll need to experiment for yourself. Plant-based milk doesn't behave the same way as dairy milk in coffee drinks made at home. Pacific Natural Foods makes a Barista Series that's used in coffee houses and other food service venues to help create a foamy drink, so it may be that the soy latte you make at home will not taste or act the same as the one you get at Starbucks.

"I believe there's a milk for everybody," Tsang said. We need to have six to eight glasses of liquid a day, and "milk is better for people than pop or soda."

Plant-based milks

Calorie counts, calcium percentages and prices are approximate because the brands vary. Check the label for specific information for each brand. For a more complete look at the nutritional content of 45 dairy and nondairy milk products, go to HealthCastle.com and click on Go UnDiet-Packaged Food Review Tool. Prices will vary from market to market.

Hemp

Taste: bold earthy flavor, similar to sesame

Appearance: grayish color

Calories: 140

Calcium: 50 percent of daily value

Price/quart: \$4

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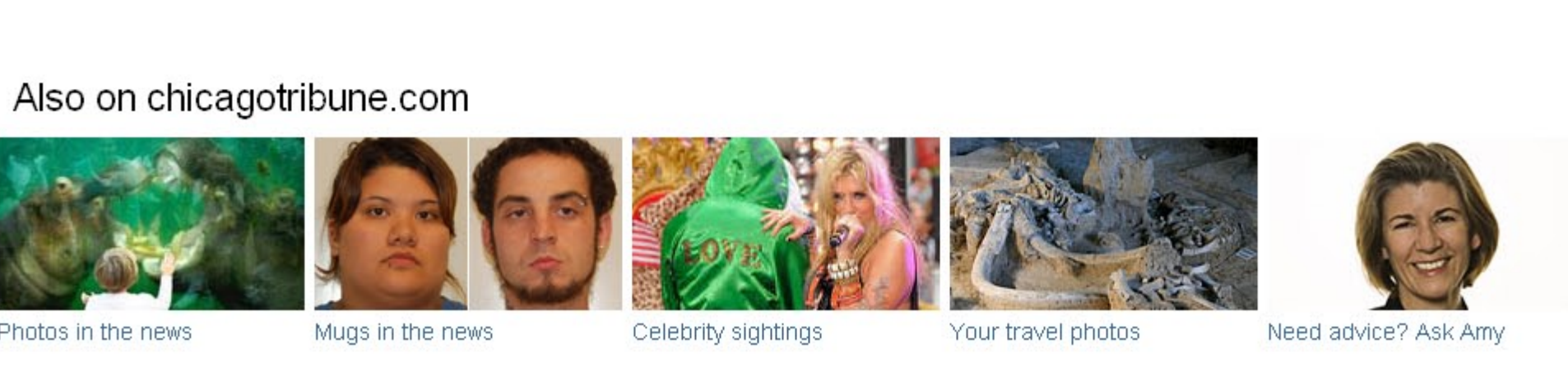
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