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You Can Now Buy Quinoa at 7-Eleven—Is That a Good Thing?

The convenience store is the latest chain to increase its health-food options.

October 02, 2014 By [Steve Holt](#)

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Is 7-Eleven trading in its Slurpees and nachos for pressed [kale](#) juices and [quinoa](#) salads? Not exactly, but it is considering adding such trendy, healthy items to its shelves. In a test market of 100 Los Angeles-area locations, customers will soon have the option to buy “nutritionally balanced” items such as wraps, salads, and fresh-squeezed juices, all endorsed by fitness guru Tony Horton of P90X fame.

The world’s largest convenience-store chain is just the latest in a line of restaurants and retailers now offering healthier—or slightly less terrible—food options. Several fast-food restaurants have added such items to their menus in recent years, and last fall [McDonald’s announced](#) that beginning in 2014, it would allow customers to substitute fruit or salad for French fries. The demand is there, and with health food turning into an increasingly profitable segment of the grocery and restaurant industries, places like 7-Eleven want to provide the supply. But industry observers say that when it comes to convenience foods, simply adding healthy options won’t make customers change their habits.

“Guilty pleasures still carry more weight for consumers,” R.J. Hottovy, an analyst with Morningstar, [said earlier this year](#). “But the industry is in a secular decline, so it’s looking for new ways to drive traffic.”

But 7-Eleven executives say the decision to carry items such as black-bean vegetable wraps and cold-pressed juice is an answer to customers who have been requesting more fresh vegetables at the stores. Raja Doddala, senior director for innovation at the company, told [USA Today](#) that purchases of fresh vegetables have jumped 30 percent in the last year and that requests for veggies clog 7-Eleven’s social media and customer service phone lines. The chain also apparently sells more bananas than it does Snickers bars.

One nutritionist, however, while commending the company’s addition of healthier options, says she wishes 7-Eleven would stop selling the oversize sodas.

“That would truly show a commitment to public health,” says Lisa R. Young, author of *The Portion Teller Plan*.

With 7-Eleven just the type of food retailer charged with clogging neighborhoods lacking access to traditional grocery stores with excessive amounts of junk, overhauling the convenience stores’ offerings with fresh fruits and vegetables could be a boon to residents of food deserts. But don’t get too excited. Just changing what’s on the shelf isn’t going to be enough, says Alex Ortega of the UCLA School of Public Health, though he too lauds the company’s effort to improve its healthy options.

“Without the basics, which is raising community awareness of healthy eating and what’s available and the marketing of the foods inside the store, the foods might not sell—especially in a convenience store,” says Ortega, who directs a program that converts corner stores into hubs of healthy food. “People generally don’t want to spend a lot of money on food [at a convenience store]. They’re usually going in for cigarettes or beer or lottery tickets.”

Healthy items may bring in customers responding to the perception that a retailer is better for them, even if they’re still buying industrial-size slushies. If stores don’t make such changes, their customers may go elsewhere, even to buy junk food.

“It’s not just that there are likely to be significant business rewards for becoming associated with healthier food. It’s that there may well be significant negative consequences for food outlets that aren’t responding to health trends,” wrote David H. Freedman in an article for the [National Association for Convenience & Fuel Retailing](#). “Those companies that take the lead in offering convenient, affordable, tasty food products that are also healthy, on the other hand, are certain to get a boost from it.”

That reality is likely to benefit 7-Eleven and its healthier options in SoCal, but don’t expect the chain to ditch the Ding-Dongs or sodas anytime soon.

“No one thinks of 7-Eleven as a health-food store,” Ortega says. “It’s still a convenience store.”