

Almond Milk Sales Skyrocket, But How Healthy Is It?



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Lesley McClurg Capital Public Radio

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Almond milk is no longer a health food niche product. Last year national sales were up 40%, according to Nielson data. Today's market is worth more than \$700 million dollars a year. That's good news for California where virtually all the nation's almonds are grown. But, as Lesley McClurg in Sacramento reports some dietitians question the nutritional value of almond milk.

Almond milk dates back to the Middle Ages when Catholics and Muslims drank it during religious periods when animal products were banned.

Today's popularity is mostly driven by people who want a dairy substitute.

Zach Nelson orders a latte with almond milk at the Mill coffee shop in Sacramento.

| Nelson: "It tastes like nuts. Lightly creamy without the coating that dairy puts over your mouth."

The Mill's co-owner Ilah Rose Cookston pulls out a large glass jug of almond milk from the fridge and steams a small cup for me to try.

| Lesley McClurg: "It tastes like a really smooth warm almond."

Customer demand inspired her to develop her own recipe from pressed almonds, macadamia nuts and dates. Her product is creamier than commercial brands.

Rose: "This milk just had enough fat in it that it just pours beautifully, pairs well with the espresso that we're using."

Customers stand in line to pay more than five dollars for a latte or cappuccino made with the Mill's milk.

Kathleen Deegan is a dietitian at Sacramento State University. She says dairy substitutes are popular with people who have food sensitivities.

| Deegan: "Probably at least a third of the population can't tolerate milk products or dairy products."

But, she worries about the growing trend.

| Deegan: "One of the biggest problems with almond milk is -- number one -- it's lower in protein than cow's milk. Number two -- there's no calcium in it, which milk, dairy is the primary source for calcium for all human beings."

Deegan points to the label on a carton of low-fat milk.

| Deegan: "It's a great protein, it's one of your highest biological value proteins. Only the egg is better than this."

Every cup of milk has eight grams of protein. A cup of almond milk -- one gram.

Deegan suggests people who are lactose intolerant take lactaid to help them digest dairy.

| Deegan: "I'm not saying necessarily that almond milk is bad for you. My contention is that many people are choosing almond milk over nonfat milk thinking it's healthier and that is incorrect."

Regardless of the nutritional value of drinkable almonds -- market demand is surging.

Top manufacturers like Silk and Blue Diamond have posted roughly 50 percent gains in the last two years.