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Amid Kale and Quinoa, Pop-Tarts Keep Hanging On

Kellogg's Breakfast Pastry Has Witnessed a Growth in Sales for 32 Straight Years

By [SARAH NASSAUER](#)

Sales of soda, cereal and frozen food are down. Sales of Pop-Tarts have gone up each year for the past 32.

The super sweet, slightly cardboard-tasting rectangles defy most eating trends big food companies are chasing. They're not gluten-free, all-natural, protein-packed or made with simple ingredients. Many similar breakfast foods by rival companies have ended up in the product graveyard.

A mix of customers gives Pop-Tarts their staying power. Teens are the biggest eaters. Younger children eat them almost as often. And adults reach for them as a retro snack.

Pop-Tarts' maker, Kellogg Co., simultaneously targets several disparate consumers: parents with nostalgia and hints of real fruit and children with cartoon characters and crazy flavors. Functionality helps, too. Shoppers increasingly want quick breakfasts they can eat with one hand on the go.

About 30% sugar, Pop-Tarts have avoided becoming a target for health advocates like some sugary breakfast cereals or soda. "I think people accept us for who and what we are," says Noel Geoffroy, senior vice president of marketing and innovation for U.S. morning foods for Kellogg.

The Pop-Tart's streak comes when many packaged foods beloved for decades aren't selling well, [from cereal](#) to soda. Sales of Kellogg's cereal, its biggest business, [fell over 5%](#) in North America in the most recent quarter. In response, big food companies, including Kellogg, are rushing to tweak their recipes, dropping artificial ingredients or marketing their [packaged foods as more natural](#).

Yet sales of synthetic-ingredient-filled Pop-Tarts hit over \$800 million in 2013, up 3.9% from the previous year, according to data from IRI, a market research firm.

Older children eating breakfast are the ideal target for a not-so-healthy but easy-to-prepare, portable food, says Katherine Wintsch, founder of the Mom Complex, a Richmond, Va.-based

consulting firm.

By age 3, children start to voice opinions about what they want to eat and by age 10, "Mom isn't even in the kitchen" when breakfast is chosen because she is getting ready for the day, Ms. Wintsch says.

Families spend an average of six minutes making breakfast and 11 minutes eating it, she says. At breakfast the goal is to keep children satiated until school lunch, hours later, Ms. Wintsch says.

Kellogg started selling Pop-Tarts in 1964 after Post Co. created a similar toaster pastry that's long since departed. It was first marketed as a fun breakfast, lunch or snack that could be eaten cold or hot. The name was a play on Pop Art, the art genre becoming widely popular at the time. Like other packaged foods, sales jumped in the 1980s and 1990s as more women headed to work.

In the early 2000s sales started to slow. Grocery stores began selling more private-label toaster pastries and both Quaker, owned by Pepsi Co Inc., and Nabisco, now owned by Mondelez International Inc., introduced their own versions.

Children ages 10 to 12 love "the sweet taste, frosting, sprinkles and especially the variety of flavors," according to a report written as part of Pop-Tarts' submission for a 2007 advertising award, according to Bryan Urbick, chief executive of Consumer Knowledge Centre, a consumer research firm, that shared the eventual award with Kellogg.

The firm was hired by Kellogg at the time to ask children to draw artwork showing "what a Pop-Tarts kids' world would be," the report says. Those drawings sparked a marketing campaign built around animated Pop-Tart characters, black and white line drawings still used by the brand.

Today, households with children aged 6 to 17 are the biggest buyers of Pop-Tarts, but teens eat them more often than children under 12, a Kellogg spokeswoman says. The company no longer markets directly to children younger than 12, following the food industry's self-imposed regulation on marketing unhealthy food, she says.

Pop-Tarts have been criticized for using the phrase "made with real fruit" and pictures of real fruit on boxes, getting reprimanded by the Children's Advertising Review Unit, an advertising industry organization that doles out recommendations for advertising to children. It now says "baked with real fruit." Pop-Tarts are made with filling that is 10% fruit.

Three years ago, hoping to attract teenagers bored during summer vacation, Kellogg created a summer concert series, Ms. Geoffroy of Kellogg says. Demi Lovato and other young stars have performed against a Pop-Tarts-themed backdrop. Life-size animated Pop-Tarts pose for photos with the crowd of tweens and teens outside free concerts around the country. For this summer's Los Angeles concert, the company hired performers to appeal to a growing Hispanic consumer base, including Jasmine Villegas (known as Jasmine V), Ms. Geoffroy says.

In a rare marketing feat, Pop-Tarts also appeal to many adults.

S'mores Pop-Tarts are the favorite flavor of Clay Michael Wesley, the 31-year-old director of graduate student life at the University of Oklahoma. "Pop-Tarts were a big part of my childhood," the Noble, Okla., resident says.

Each year Mr. Wesley hosts a "Pop-Start" event for students, setting up a table in the center of

campus with "toasters and every type of Pop-Tart that is available," to welcome students back to classes with something familiar, he says. He tries to limit how often his own three children eat Pop-Tarts as breakfast, opting for more nutritious meals like omelets, he says.

Pop-Tarts draw mentions everywhere from a [Jerry Seinfeld stand-up routine](#) to an animated video of a bouncing gray cat with a pink Pop-Tarts body, [dubbed the Nyan Cat](#), that has over [110 million views on YouTube](#).

As a result, it's been hard for toaster pastry competitors to knock Pop-Tarts off their perch. Quaker and Nabisco have discontinued their versions first sold in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2008 General Mills Inc. started selling a Fiber One Toaster Pastry aimed at adults, but discontinued the product in 2011, a company spokesman says.

Organic toaster pastries sold by Nature's Path Foods Inc., an organic cereal company based in Richmond, British Columbia, are a tiny part of the market. Nature's Path pastries are still high in sugar, but appeal to people looking to avoid artificial ingredients like dyes, says Arjan Stephens, executive vice president of sales and marketing for the company. A box of 6 costs around \$4. Pop-Tarts cost about \$2 for a box of 8.

Even the homemade crowd loves the taste and convenience of a sweet, hand-held pastry. Meghan Ritchie was selling baked goods from her front steps to morning commuters in Brooklyn, N.Y. When she started selling a fresh version of a toaster pastry to cafes, business took off, she says. Now she co-owns Megpies, a maker of "artisan tarts," according to the company website.

She thinks nostalgia for Pop-Tarts contributes to her products' popularity, though she didn't eat Pop-Tarts herself growing up. "My mom worked at a health food store called Soybeans n' Such," she says.

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Corrections & Amplifications

A previous version of this article misidentified a photo of coconut water as coconut milk. (Sept. 10, 2014)

Pillsbury Co. started selling Toaster Strudel in 1984. A timeline accompanying this article about Pop-Tarts incorrectly said that General Mills Inc. started selling the toaster pastry. General Mills now owns Pillsbury and therefore Toaster Strudel. (Sept. 11, 2014)

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