

PA Milk Marketing Board  
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*Is Nothing Sacred.....Or Will the Grinch Steal Christmas?*

Just a few days ago I heard a news story that was shocking and perhaps a sign of the times. A large toy retailer was complaining that shipping companies are “price gouging.” He stated that costs to ship Christmas toys from China to the US will increase by more than seven times this year.

He also expressed concern that many toys Santa will seek to deliver to hopeful children, or would be bought by others as gifts, just will not be available! What is coming to the world?

But then a more horrifying thought came to me. What if people leave Santa a tall glass of nut beverage with his chocolate chip (my personal bias) cookies?

I imagine that you are chuckling right now, but could we be staring at this possibility for the future? When will the dairy industry begin to take seriously the yearly increase in consumer purchases of non-dairy fluid beverages? Not only that, recent reports indicate that sales of non-dairy ice cream are also on the rise.

According to the market research firm Market Consult (2020), 32 percent of consumers drink non-dairy “milks” at least once per week. Twelve percent reported they drink dairy alternatives full-time. Almond beverage is by far the favorite with 69 percent of those who purchase non-dairy with coconut beverage running a not-too-close second at 21 percent. Research conducted by the Plant Based Foods Association closely parallels these results.

Seventy three percent of these dairy alternatives are used with cereal and over sixty percent are used for straight drinking, in smoothies or coffee, or in cooking.

I would like to note, however, that in the past year, oat beverage has taken over coconut according to a recent study by Nielsen. Research participants like its “smooth and creamy taste,” which I have also seen mentioned in television advertisements. Well, I can tell you that this is one consumer that will not be checking that out any time soon!

You may think that there are certain demographics that prefer the dairy alternative beverages, but that is not the case. Men are just as likely to consume alternatives as women, and there is no skew toward a liberal political ideology. There is, however, a slightly higher (but not significant) level of urban and suburban, as well as younger consumers who prefer the non-dairy offerings.

COVID-19 has certainly made it difficult to carry pre-pandemic trends forward for any type of analyses, and the plant-based beverage market did grow at a slower pace during 2020, but prior to that there had been a 61 percent increase in US non-dairy “milk” over a 5-year period. Digest that for a moment—61 percent in five years!

What is the dairy industry supposed to do—or what can it do—to address the threats posed by increased sales of alternative beverages?

As I noted in an article a few weeks ago, education about the nutritional benefits of milk is key to winning this fight. It is not enough to promote WHOLE milk; we need to promote all dairy as more healthful than the plant-based products.

No less than Mayo Clinic has made the following statement: “...it’s tough to beat dairy milk for balanced nutrition...” (Butterbrodt, 8/13/20).

Not only does dairy have more natural nutrients, the quality of the nutrients is also important. Just looking at dairy protein, it is of higher quality than protein from plants because it has what is referred to as high biological value, resulting from a complete array of amino acids that are more “usable” by the body.

Soy protein is considered to have a high biological value, but its usability by the body has not been studied. These notes on dairy proteins versus plant proteins from Practical Gastroenterology (2018) also include the powerful statement that “Most other proteins (beyond soy protein) found in plant-based milks are not complete and do not offer the full array of essential amino acids.”

We in the dairy industry must do a better job of educating ourselves and making certain that the positive—and indisputable—message about dairy nutritional benefits gets distributed and repeated over and over! Join me in making sure that Santa does not have to drink a dairy alternative this Christmas with his cookies.

PMMB supports efforts to promote research and education related to dairy nutrition. We are always available to respond to questions and concerns. I can be reached at 717-210-8244 and by email at [chardbarge@pa.gov](mailto:chardbarge@pa.gov).