

## **Daiya vegan cheese is all the rage**

**By Chris Wytenuis**

Vegans have been on the hunt for the perfect cheese alternative for years. Vegans don't eat dairy cheese because they're strict vegetarians, which means they don't eat anything that came from an animal. Most animal foods are easy to replace with vegan alternatives, but it's tough to replicate the stretch and melting quality of cheese without dairy. But now there's Daiya brand vegan cheese, so vegans can eat their pizza and grilled cheese just like their omnivore friends.

Kristen Bourke, the brand manager for Daiya, said the product took off shortly after hitting the market in 2008 thanks to aggressive marketing. Daiya generated a lot of buzz in the vegan community after bloggers, magazine writers and cookbook authors got to sample and test the product. This generated a lot of good word of mouth.

Daiya hit it big in 2009 after appearing at the Natural Products Expo West, one of the largest natural food industry product shows in the country. Bourke said after the expo, the popular vegetarian magazine VegNews awarded Daiya its "Best in Show" award. Daiya exploded in popularity from there.

One of the keys to Daiya's success may be the fact vegetarian and vegan foods is a thriving industry. And demand for these products is on the rise. In 2003, sales of vegetarian foods in the United States amounted to just \$1.02 billion, according to a market report published by the the Mintel Group. By 2008, sales had risen to \$1.46 billion and forecasts predict sales will reach \$1.92 billion next year. Even after adjusting for inflation, this still constitutes a substantial 46 percent increase in sales in just eight years.

There aren't definitive sales figures for the vegan cheese industry because it's a small market. Some data is available, but it pertains specifically to soy cheese. In 2006, total soy cheese sales in the United States amounted to just \$1 million, according to a market intelligence report by Packaged Facts. Sales of natural dairy cheese, on the other hand, approached \$14.1 billion in 2009. Although the vegan cheese market is tiny, Daiya is a revolutionary product that's shaking up the industry.

Before Daiya, vegans had to settle for cheese products that didn't melt or tasted funky. No wonder soy cheese sales were so low. But then Daiya Foods figured it all out and fixed many of the problems with other vegan cheese brands. Daiya melts like dairy cheese, tastes similar to dairy cheese and does so without the use of soy, which is classified as a major allergen by the USDA. Bourke said Daiya manages to melt like no other vegan cheese on the market thanks to its tapioca base and its innovative manufacturing process. Bourke couldn't go into details because she said it's a "trade secret," but she assured Daiya's method is "completely different" than its competitors. And every other vegan cheese is trying to play catch up.

Daiya is a small food company headquartered in Vancouver, but the brand has still managed to go far in a relatively short amount of time. Just two years ago, Daiya was only sold in bulk quantities to food service companies. Bourke said restaurants, select natural food markets and online retailers bought huge bags of Daiya to either cook with or resell in smaller containers. But customers kept calling in asking where they could purchase Daiya locally. So a year later, Daiya launched its retail line in 2010. Now, Daiya is available in supermarkets and health food stores nationwide. Currently, Daiya comes pre-shredded and in three flavor styles, which include mozzarella, cheddar and the newly-launched pepperjack.

Many New York City vegetarian restaurants are Daiya converts. Dave LaPointe, owner of the popular Curly's Vegetarian Lunch in the East Village, said his restaurant started using Daiya cheese in its vegan dishes two years ago. Previously, he said his restaurant used Veggie Kaas soy cheese. But the problem was the texture of the cheese. LaPointe described it as "disgusting" because it stuck to your teeth and looked like sperm. There was only one redeeming quality. "It melted," LaPointe said, "so we

used it.”

Once Daiya became available, LaPointe said his food distributor immediately began supplying him with Daiya instead of Veggie Kaas. His chefs found Daiya melted well and its soy free formula meant that his customers could cut down on their soy intake. In addition to the allergen issue, he said many vegans already eat a lot of soy, so a soy-free cheese product would mean they could introduce more variety into their diet.

LaPointe said customers who come into the restaurant sometimes even ask whether the restaurant uses Daiya cheese in its dishes. He said people rarely request specific brands of anything but customers are especially interested in Daiya. LaPointe said this made more of a difference before Daiya became so popular on the New York vegetarian restaurant scene. People ask for Daiya, but “everyone has it now anyway.”

Julie Swegle, a vegan of three years and food blogger, said she was a "huge fan" of cheese before ditching dairy. Swegle said she thinks she's tried every brand of vegan cheese on the market. And Daiya is her favorite because it melts so well.

Unheated, Swegle said Daiya isn't anything like dairy cheese. Straight from the bag, it has a strange, grainy texture. But Swegle loves the product when melted. She said she loves to use Daiya in grilled cheese sandwiches and pizzas, two foods she said she couldn't make vegan versions of before Daiya. "Daiya is the first non-dairy cheese I've ever had that could be compared to real cheese in its cooked form," Swegle said.

Elise Cobb, a vegan of three years who hasn't had dairy for a decade, said what really sets Daiya apart is its texture. “It is soft and melts like normal cheese,” Cobb said, “which is something most other faux cheeses aren't able to replicate. It doesn't get hard or weirdly plasticity at various temperatures either.”

Cobb likes a few other brands of vegan cheese but not because they melt. “I really love Follow Your Heart cheese too,” Cobb said, “but it's not great in terms of melting. I like the flavored nacho cheese variety but that's really only for the flavor profile.”

Cobb said another problem with Follow Your Heart is the texture. “As with most other fake cheeses, it took a while to get used to its consistency and flavor because it's not exactly natural,” Cobb said.

Otherwise, Cobb isn't a fan of other vegan cheese brands. “I am iffy on most other soy cheeses,” Cobb said. “The Galaxy brand is very bizarre and constantly changing.”

Just because many vegans are fans of Daiya doesn't mean all vegans are interested in dairy free cheese products. Alex Collins, a "nearly" vegan college student at the University of Connecticut, has never had Daiya and doesn't plan to. She said she likes the fact these products are out there for vegans who want to replace cheese, but they're not for her. "I don't eat certain things for a reason, so I don't enjoy imitation foods."

For her, if she really wanted to eat cheese, she would just eat the real thing. She said the thought of eating a product that had the taste and texture of cheese without containing any real dairy cheese "weirds" her out.

But vegans who do enjoy Daiya cheese have more to look forward to in the future. Bourke couldn't go into details just yet, but she said Daiya's research and development team is constantly testing new flavors and formats other than shredded cheese. As Daiya Foods continues to grow and expand, new products will eventually hit the market shelves.

## Taste Test by Chris Wytenus

I put three of the most readily available vegan cheeses to the test to see how they compared in terms of price, taste and meltability. These vegan cheeses are available at Whole Foods and other retailers. Before sampling, each cheese was sprinkled over a piece of bread and baked under a hot broiler for 10 minutes.



### Daiya

How it's sold: pre-shredded, 8-ounce bags.

Price: \$4.49 at Whole Foods.

Meltability: melted well, bubbled, stretched and pulled apart like dairy cheese.

Taste: it came the closest to replicating the taste of dairy cheese.



### **Galaxy Nutritional Foods Vegan Cheese**

How it's sold: block, 8-ounces.

Price: \$3.49 at Whole Foods.

Meltability: became soft but did not melt, looked exactly as it did before cooking.

Taste: did not taste anything like dairy cheese



### **Follow Your Heart Vegan Gourmet**

How it's sold: block, 10-ounces.

Price: \$4.39 at Whole Foods.

Meltability: melted somewhat, but its texture was very watery and it did not stretch.

Taste: disgusting, the cheese coated your mouth.