



Trends in Protein-Rich Foods



There is a rising global interest in high-protein food products, particularly those featuring bioactive dairy proteins aimed at enhancing athletic performance, innovative plant-based meat alternatives, and protein-enriched snacks. In 2021, the global protein market was valued at €22.03 billion and is projected to grow to €26.46 billion, with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 3.74%. The food and beverage sector represents the largest consumer of these products and is poised for significant expansion. This growth is driven by the development of diverse protein formulations that offer various health benefits such as promoting fullness, aiding muscle recovery, supporting weight management, and maintaining energy levels.

High-protein foods fall into two main groups: animal-derived proteins and plant-based proteins. Animal sources include whey and casein (from dairy), eggs, beef, chicken, and even insects. On the other hand, plant-based proteins are sourced from ingredients like soy, peas, brown rice, and chickpeas.

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PLANT PROTEINS LEAD THE EUROPEAN MARKET

Driven by the rise of veganism, plant proteins are increasingly popular in Europe. Soy protein is the most widely used, available in flour, concentrate, and isolate forms. Legumes are also a key source due to their low fat and valuable nutrients like calcium, folate, zinc, and iron. Pea protein is gaining popularity too, as it contains all nine essential amino acids and is seen as a healthier option.

Some key global trends shaping the high-protein food and beverage industry include:

- Health awareness: Since the pandemic, health-conscious consumers have leaned toward high-protein foods, recognizing protein as a key nutrient.
- Taste matters: Consumers want healthy foods without compromising on taste. Whey protein is favored as it blends well without affecting flavor.
- Sustainability: Millennials and Gen Z are fueling demand for eco-friendly proteins. These include climate-resilient crops (e.g., millets, quinoa), recycled proteins, regenerative farming sources, marine-based options like algae, and resource-efficient insect proteins.
- Ethical choices: Shoppers increasingly look for sustainability labels that reflect ethical sourcing, animal welfare, organic ingredients, and low environmental impact.
- Sports nutrition: Products tailored for active lifestyles—especially whey protein for muscle recovery—are booming. Insect, soy, and pea proteins are also gaining ground in this segment.
- Functional foods: Items like nutrition bars, supplements, and meal replacements must offer high protein and strong nutritional value. As functional foods grow, so will protein demand.
- Protein blends: Combining animal, plant, or fungal proteins satisfies consumer interest in variety. These blends offer both complete protein and superfood benefits—like almond milk or beef-mushroom burgers.
- Veganism: With Europe leading in vegan populations, producers are exploring protein sources from legumes, seeds, nuts, fungi, and algae. New ingredients like sunflower, pumpkin, flax, and chia seeds are helping meet this growing demand.





Evolving Protein Choices

Protein is now offered in a variety of innovative formats:

- **Functional beverages:** Beyond traditional shakes, protein is being added to drinks like water, juice, and coffee. These products are designed to support mental and emotional well-being while offering convenience and taste.
- **Baked goods:** Easy-to-use high-protein mixes for cakes, cookies, and breads are gaining popularity. Insect-based proteins like cricket flour are being used in energy bars and baked products.
- **Ice cream:** Healthier ice cream options with high protein and reduced sugar are becoming more common, combining indulgence with nutrition.
- **Snacks:** On-the-go protein-rich snacks such as nut and seed packs, jerky, yogurt, and even mealworms are meeting the demand for healthier snacking.
- **Ready meals:** Frozen meals, including pizzas, chicken, and seafood options, are being reformulated with higher protein content.

Choosing the Right Protein Ingredient

Choosing the right protein starts with understanding the target consumer's needs. Key considerations include functionality, nutrition, cost, and market trends. In Europe, sustainability is a major factor, with consumers favoring proteins sourced through eco-friendly methods like regenerative farming.

To stay competitive, manufacturers must meet these standards. With a wide range of protein options now available, smart selection can boost brand success. Plant-based proteins are gaining traction, especially as global demand is set to double by 2050—surpassing what animal sources alone can supply.



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No. 110, West Hoveizeh St.,
North Sohrevardi Ave., Tehran
www.pariznova.com ● info@pariznova.com