

# HANDHELDS DRIVE MEXICAN GROWTH

Frozen snacks stumbled a bit, but better-for-you burritos and clean-label bowls continue to gain momentum.

BY DENISE LEATHERS

**C**ontinued demand for bold, global-inspired flavors suggests a bright future for frozen Mexican foods, especially in handhelds. During the 52 weeks ended Dec. 25, sales of frozen Mexican handhelds jumped 2.0% across channels while the sales



**Saffron Road adds a pair of bowls made with dark meat chicken raised without antibiotics to its clean-label lineup.**

for the category as a whole fell 0.3%, reports Chicago-based market research firm IRI ([iri.worldwide.com](http://iri.worldwide.com)). Frozen Mexican snacks fell 3.6% during the same period. Why the discrepancy? Whether natural, organic or just better quality, “We’ve seen the emergence of a small but vibrant super-premium

tier in handhelds,” says Curtis Hector, senior brand director for Mexican foods at Houston-based Ajinomoto Windsor, maker of the José Olé ([joseole.com](http://joseole.com)) lineup. “Clean label is a big trend.” But on the snack side, most offerings are still fairly traditional, which may be keeping some consumers out of the category.

It’s not just about fat and calories anymore, continues Jack Acree, executive vp at Stamford, Conn.-based Saffron Road Food ([saffronroadfood.com](http://saffronroadfood.com)). It’s about quality and ingredients. “Consumers’ definition of ‘healthy’ has really evolved, becoming more ingredient-based than nutrition panel-based,” he explains, citing the company’s use of animal proteins raised without antibiotics as a prime example.

Saffron Road will launch two new Mexican bowls during the first quarter, Verde Tortilla Bake with Chicken, Black Beans & Rice and Grilled Vegetable Tortilla Bake with Red Beans & Rice, both made with dark meat chicken raised without antibiotics. “Dark meat chicken used to be off limits for this category,” says Acree, “but its use speaks to authenticity” — another key category trend.

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“Millennials continue to look for authenticity in their food choices,” confirms Todd Martin, founder of Tucson, Ariz.-based Tucson Tamale ([tucsontamale.com](http://tucsontamale.com)), which uses an ancient corn nixtamalization process to create its traditional, corn husk-wrapped tamales. This year, he continues, the company plans to roll out tamale bowls and tamale pies, giving consumers who don’t want to deal with the corn husk wrapper another option.

## MEXICAN FOR BREAKFAST, DESSERT

But there’s still plenty of activity in the “Americanized” Mexican side of the business, particularly in the breakfast daypart. In fact, ethnic-inspired breakfasts, particularly breakfast tacos, are one of the most important culinary trends of 2017. But as in the rest of the category, clean ingredients are key. So Dinuba, Calif.-based Ruiz Foods, maker of the El Monterey ([elmonterey.com](http://elmonterey.com)) lineup, recently introduced an Egg, Turkey Sausage and Cheese Burrito under its new Simply sub-brand. Made with real scrambled eggs and fresh-baked, whole grain tortillas, it has 11 grams of protein per serving, highlighting another in-demand attribute. “Consumers know protein helps them feel full longer, so they’re searching for high-protein foods, especially in the morning,” says president and CEO Rachel Cullen.

Mexican-inspired desserts on more restaurant menus prompted Pennsauken, N.J.-based J&J Snacks’ ([jjsnack.com](http://jjsnack.com)) recent rollout of frozen churros. Offered under the Pillsbury label, oven-ready Churro Bites come with a packet of cinnamon and sugar so consumers can sweeten them to taste. Although J&J introduced Oreo Churros last year, “There wasn’t a traditional frozen churro out there, and we wanted to capitalize on the growing popularity of churros in food-service,” says strategic partnerships manager Amanda Osorio.

Rollouts of savory frozen Mexican snacks continue. Ruiz debuted a pair of El Monterey Signature Empanadas (Beef, Mozzarella & Monterey Jack Cheese and White Meat Chicken with Cheddar & Mozzarella Cheese) that can be eaten straight or dipped in salsa, guac or sour cream. And late last year, it launched Bigger! Bolder! Taquitos inspired by the company’s top-selling roller-grill Tornados. “More than two times the size of regular taquitos, they’re hearty enough for a quick meal,” says Cullen. Flavors include Chicken & Monterey Jack and Beef, Cheddar & Monterey Jack. ■



**J&J Snacks taps into demand for Mexican-inspired desserts with its Pillsbury Churro Bites.**