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Food & dining

6 healthier alternatives for the p in pb&j

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Since peanut butter, long America's favorite lunchbox spread, has been banned from many schools because of allergies, alternatives have stepped in to fill the void.

Candidates for the other half of the jelly sandwich are nut, legume, and seed butters, often toasted first to enhance the flavors, then crushed into a paste. From there, ingredients such as oil, sugar, salt, and emulsifiers are added to make the paste edible and spreadable. They are all a good source of protein, ranging from 7 to 10 grams per 2 tablespoons (peanut butter has 7 grams).

We tasted an array of spreads and butters made from almonds, cashews, sunflower seeds, soybeans, and hemp, along with Biscoff Spread, a European



import made from 57 percent Biscoff cookies, and advertised as a “European alternative to peanut butter.” Tasters smeared the butters and spreads on plain crackers and took bites of apple as palate cleansers.

We weren’t thrilled with any of the choices. I.M. Healthy SoyNut Butter came out ahead of the group, grudgingly we thought. Manitoba’s Hemp Seed Butter garnered the most negative superlatives: “nastiest” and “ugliest” among them.

The group had a collective grimace from start to finish. We suspect that a thick (very thick) layer of jelly would surely help put a grin on these faces.

Biscoff Spread

\$3 for 14 ounces

This European spread is basically crushed cookies with sugar and oil. One of the tasters pegged it, except she didn’t get the cookie correct. “Tastes like it has crushed graham crackers. Is this s’more butter? Your child would love you for packing this in a lunch, because it tastes like dessert.” “Molasses-sweet and smooth. I would use this to dip an apple.” Many guessed it was Nutella-like (hazelnuts and chocolate). “Chocolate-y, sweet, smooth chemical taste. Too sweet. Kids would like this.” “The color is unattractive.” And: “This tastes like liquid candy.”

I.M. Healthy SoyNut Butter Creamy (WINNER)

\$4.99 for 15 ounces

Who thought roasted soybeans could be so unidentifiable? For the record, this is a legume butter, no soy nuts (that is the company’s fanciful term). This butter got noticed for its spreadability and similarity to peanut butter. Everyone took a guess at what it was made with and none were correct. “This sticky tan spread adheres to all surfaces equally, the knife, a cracker, or your tongue. Its sculptable consistency coats your palate with a smooth sweet and salty peanut butter-like flavor.” “Hints of pumpkin. It is really thick - too thick.” “Sunflower seed? It might be greatly enhanced with jelly.” Two thought the sweet taste might come from honey. It’s actually from maltodextrin and granulated cane juice.

Earth Balance Natural Almond Butter and Flaxseed Creamy

\$8.89 for 10 ounces

Almost all comments were favorable, but only one taster chose it as the favorite. Flavor got good marks but texture was mixed: “This makes me really happy after all the others. This might be almond butter or some nut. It sticks to the roof of my mouth.” Another guessed correctly: “Roasted almond? Seems stiff when you spoon it out, but pleasant taste. Would be good on a sandwich with a ripe banana or spread on apple or celery. The only one I would buy.” “Salty in a very good way. Good substitute for peanut butter.” Another: “What a relief! The most peanut butter-like in appearance, but not as satisfying.” And: “Now we are talking. We are back among the living. Creamy, would work nicely in a dan dan mien noodle dish [Chinese sesame sauce noodles]. Nice alternative to peanut butter.”

Manitoba Harvest Hemp Seed Butter

\$9.99 for 10 ounces

Unanimous that this was least favorite; many comments are unprintable. It is hard to reconcile that the sweet light colored seeds that get sprinkled on yogurt and salads turn into this: “Hippie paste, suitable for only deeply committed vegans.” “This simply surpasses all expectations of nasty.” “Grass seed?” “Algae and millet or sesame seed?” “Tastes like fermented hay.” “Vile!”

MaraNatha All Natural Roasted Cashew Butter Creamy

\$5.99 for 8 ounces

Three tasters guessed that the nut was cashew and one chose it as a favorite. This entry got many suggestions for potential uses. “Light in color and not too grainy. Naturally sweet from the cashew. I would like this with grated carrots and avocado on a sandwich.” Another suggestion: “Could be used as a pasta sauce with sauteed garlic, roasted red pepper, and onions; thin with broth.” Many noted a distracting oily consistency: “Barely edible.” “Smell and texture is nasty.” “Although this butter is flavorful, it is thick and oily.” One thought it would make a “good dip or be good in baking. But it sticks to the roof of my mouth.”

SunButter Natural Sunflower Seed Spread

\$3.99 for 16 ounces

Many tasters thought the texture of this spread was thin. “Looser than the other spreads. Roasted sunflower butter with a little honey? Salted perfectly.” (Not honey, but dehydrated cane syrup is the second ingredient.) “Sweet and slippery and enduring in its taste sensation, but the oily substance seems more suited to being a lubricant. The aftertaste is unappealing.” “Smooth and flowing, nice looking but odd sweet chemical taste. Not good.” “This has an oily smell. Sunflower? This might be edible in small doses, perhaps on celery.”

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