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Snack happy

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In my world, "There's nothing to eat in the house" means there are no onions and no vegetables, no eggs and no cheese; nothing that I can turn into dinner. But for my kids, that very same phrase means there is nothing to snack on; no crackers, no pretzels, no nuts, no crunchy anything to get them from meal to meal.

What my kids don't know is that I keep our cupboards snack-free on purpose, hoping that the lack of bad-for-you snacks will force them to reach for apples and carrots instead.

Now and then, however, I can be convinced to give in, especially when the snack offerings are as healthy as those made by Crum Creek Mills.

The company makes a line of soy-based packaged foods including muffin mixes and pasta. But the products that impress me most are their Soy Bites and Soy Nut Trail Mix, both good, soy-laced snacks that are higher in protein and a whole lot lower in fat than most packaged snacks.

A 10-pack of single-serving size nut mix is \$4.75; a 10-pack of Soy Bites is \$7.50. The bites come in several flavors — Rosemary Garlic was my favorite. To order the snacks, go to <http://www.crumcreek.com>.

Say what?

Ditch the unpronounceables from my kids' cereal and you have my attention. Lower the price and you can have my ATM card. That's what Mom's Best Naturals has done, no exaggeration.

The Minnesota company deserves a giant "You Rock" award for simplifying the matter of getting healthy cereal into the mouths of the masses. Even the out-of-control-picky teen who lives a few doors away loves this cereal.

Why? She says the Mom's Best Sweetened Wheat-fuls, Toasty O's, Honey Nut Toasty O's and Raisin Bran all taste "normal."

What she doesn't know — or even care about — is that these cereals are made without artificial preservatives, colors or flavors, and maybe even more to the point, without high-fructose corn syrup.

Budget shoppers will especially love that the boxes are nearly double the size of their healthy competitors — for about the same price. Mom's Best Naturals are \$2.49 to \$3.49. The box is yellow with a touch of red and blue.

If you can't find it on store shelves, go to <http://www.momsbestnaturals.com> and order a case or two of your favorites. You won't be disappointed.

Not just vanilla

Vanilla really is just vanilla when you put it in chocolate, in blondies or in a batch of oatmeal cookies. If it weren't there, you'd miss it, but it's not the single most important flavor in the food.

But when you put vanilla into a mug of milk, a bowl of vanilla custard or a delicate creme brulee, the exact personality of your vanilla does matter.

That's when you want to use a power-packed vanilla like Arizona Vanilla's new 3-Fold Vanilla Pastes, vanillas that are so unique to their country of origin that it's hard to believe that they are called by the same name. The company makes a rich, dark Madagascar vanilla and a lighter, more floral Tahitian vanilla.

Both are mixes of extract and ground vanilla, which deliver not only flavor, but pretty little black seed flecks into cream desserts. They are \$10 for 2 ounces, \$16 for 4 ounces. They can be found at specialty stores and online at <http://www.arizonavanilla.com>.