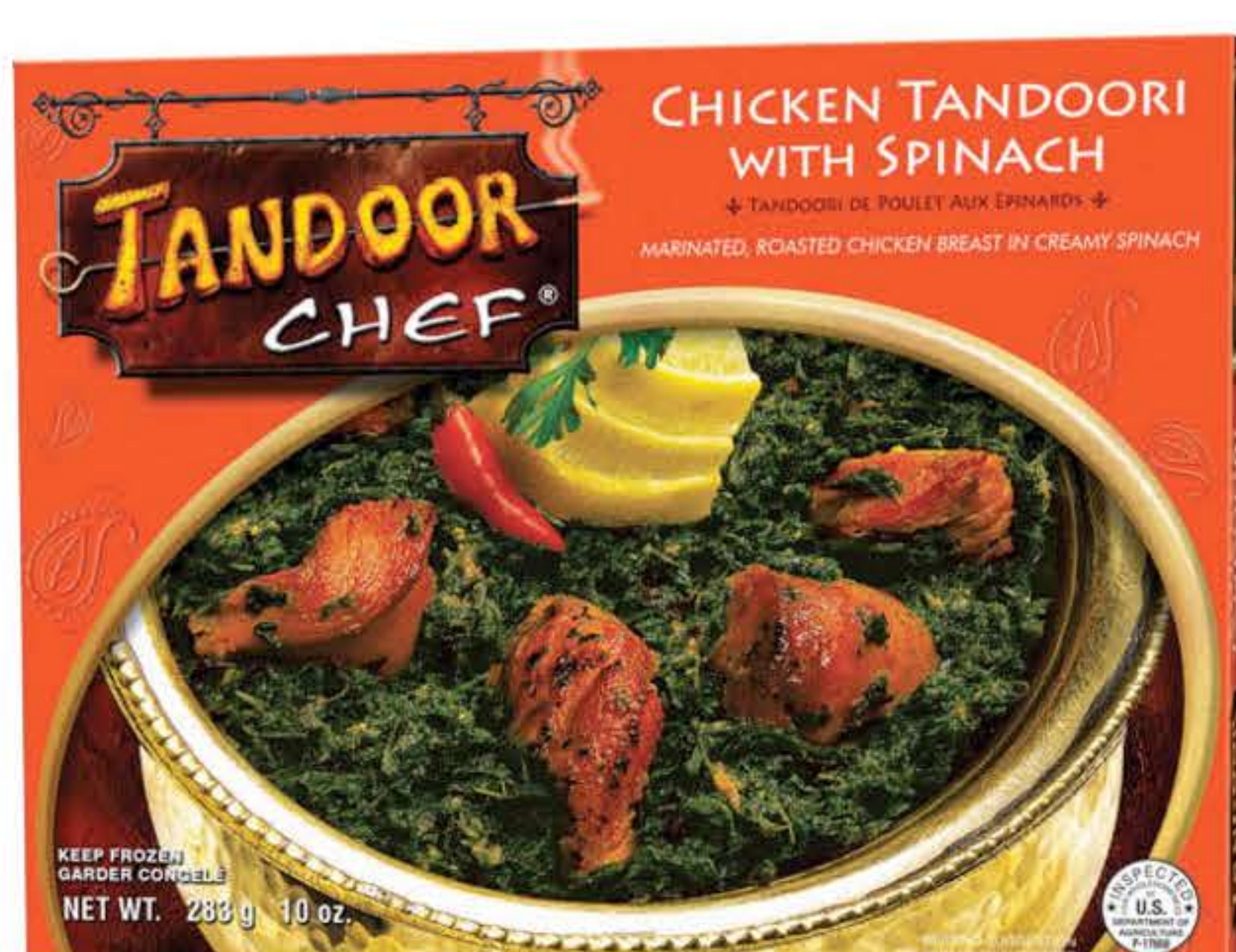


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# 10 frozen dinners that pass the nutrition test



Tandoor Chef frozen meals are also made with all-natural ingredients, and many contain ample veggies. My favorite is the very-low-carb Chicken Tandoori with Spinach, with 200 calories, 15 grams protein, and just six grams of carbs.

By Molly Kimball | NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune on October 07, 2014 at 9:45 AM, updated October 07, 2014 at 10:06 AM [Print](#)

The fresh-food crowd may cringe at the very mention of frozen meals. But there's no arguing the fact that they are convenient, cheap, and fast, making them a popular lunch option at the office, or a no-cook dinner in a pinch.

The challenge is to find frozen meals that taste good without sacrificing your health or your waistline.

Most are crammed with sodium — even the lighter, better-for-you brands typically have at least 500 to 700 mg of sodium, nearly a third of the upper limit recommended by the USDA Dietary Guidelines.

And many are loaded with refined carbs (think white pasta, white rice, white bread), with minimal protein or veggies. And it makes sense from the manufacturer's perspective — these white starches are cheap; piling in veggies and lean proteins would drive up costs.

Since most of us get more than enough carbs in our diets, for those looking to keep weight in check (or shed a few pounds), I generally recommend products with a good ratio of protein to carbs, meaning to look for meals with nearly as much (or more) protein than carbs. Not only does protein keep us feeling fuller longer, it can also help to enhance our alertness and focus, and prevents the loss of valuable calorie-burning muscle mass. White carbs, on the other hand, are quickly digested and do little to keep us feeling satisfied for long.

A few numbers to keep in mind that can help put the nutrition facts into perspective: Three ounces of lean meat contain about 20 grams of protein. Two slices of bread have roughly 30 grams of carbs. So that Asian-inspired rice bowl with 75 grams of carbs and 10 grams of protein? Not such a great option for the majority of us. But a grilled chicken marinara dinner with 31 grams of carbs and 21 grams of protein is a decent option.

And don't freak out if a frozen meal has 10 or 15 grams of fat, particularly if it's from heart-smart oils and fish like salmon (as a frame of reference, a tablespoon of olive oil has 14 grams of fat). Fat, like protein and fiber, helps to keep us feeling full, and too little fat can leave us ravenous in no time.

As for calories, 250 to 400 for a frozen meal is appropriate for most people, varying with an individual's size, activity level, and appetite. As far as fat content, I don't worry too much about the grams of total fat in a frozen dinner. As long as it has enough protein and you're keeping calories in check, it's not likely that you'll be getting too much fat.

Simple as it sounds, the picture on the front of the box can give us a quick idea of the nutritional profile; it's easy to spot the white rice, pasta, and breads. Check the ingredient list, looking for whole grain pasta and brown rice (or no starch at all, just protein and veggies).

If you've already got a freezer full of carb-filled, protein-depleted "diet" frozen meals, you can improve the nutritional profile of your meal by having an easy protein-rich snack or side item along with it, like plain Greek yogurt, cottage cheese, string cheese, or a hard-boiled egg. And of course it's always good to add any veggies when you can, fresh or frozen.

**Here are my top picks for frozen dinners that are not only convenient, but nutritious as well. All of their websites have store-locator features, and if you don't see them in your local grocery, you can always ask the store manager to stock them.**

**EVOL** (Love, spelled backwards) products are made with all-natural ingredients that you could conceivably have in your kitchen, and their Lean & Fit line is made with fiber-rich whole grain pasta and brown rice. My top pick from the EVOL line is their **Panang Curry Chicken**, with 280 calories, 34 grams of carbs, and 19 grams of protein.

Jennifer Armstrong, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

**Tandoor Chef** frozen meals are also made with all-natural ingredients, and many contain ample veggies. My favorite is the very-low-carb **Chicken Tandoori with Spinach**, with 200 calories, 15 grams protein, and just six grams of carbs.

**Artisan Bistro** meals are all gluten-free, low glycemic, and centered on sustainably-raised ingredients. While they're all good options, I really like their **Grass-fed beef with Mushroom Sauce** (plus French lentils and vegetable medley) with 350 calories, 32 grams of carbs, and 23 grams of protein, and their **Wild Salmon with Pesto** with 310 calories, 21 grams of carbs, and 16 grams of protein.

**Kashi** is known for their whole grain blends, and their frozen dinners are no exception. Some can be higher in carbs and lower in protein than I prefer for most people, but their **Chicken Florentine** is a great option, with 290 calories, 31 grams of carbs, and 22 grams of protein.

**Amy's Kitchen** is a vegetarian brand that's marketed as all-natural, fresh and organic, but I typically don't recommend most of their frozen meals, even their *Light & Lean* line. The majority of their products are very carb-heavy, with at least three to four times as much carb as protein, and they're often made with white pasta and other white starches. Their **Tofu Scramble with Veggies and Hashbrowns**, however, is one that I really like, with 320 calories, 19 grams of carbs, and 22 grams of protein.

**Healthy Choice** frozen meals aren't always, well, healthy. Most contain at least a few ingredients that most of us don't have in our kitchen — soy lecithin, locust bean gum, or flavor enhancers like disodium inosinate and guanylate, for example, but the nutrition stats for many of their products can be pretty decent.

Healthy Choice Café Steamers, particularly the Mediterranean and Top Chef-inspired lines, are mostly made with a blend of whole grain and white pasta, and the carb counts are reasonable. But all of their Asian-inspired Café Steamers are high in sugar, some containing even more sugar than protein. Some of the better varieties include **Chicken Marsala with Mushrooms** and (partially) whole grain penne with 250 calories, 29 grams of carbs, and 18 grams protein, and their **Grilled Chicken Marinara with Parmesan** with 270 calories, 31 grams of carbs, and 21 grams protein.

**Lean Cuisine**, like Healthy Choice, can be hit-or-miss, with refined carbs and sugary sauces in some of their products, not to mention not-so-wholesome ingredients like caramel coloring, sodium phosphates, and carrageenan. But **Lean Cuisine's Honestly Good** line is made with all-natural, simple ingredients. Most of the varieties have a sugary sauce, but at least it's in a separate packet so that you can add as little or as much as you like. The **Roasted Red Pepper Chicken** (with broccoli and whole grain pasta) is my top pick from their Honestly Good line, with 270 calories, 29 grams of carbs, and 25 grams of protein.

**Weight Watchers Smart Ones** are yet another example of diet-friendly marketing and packaging that doesn't always match what's inside. The Smart Ones Classic Favorites tend to be low in protein; too low to qualify as a full meal for many. Their Smart Ones *Smart Creations* line has more protein, like the **Chicken Santa Fe** with 20 grams of protein and just 11 grams carbs. It only has 140 calories, however, which can seem more like a snack than a meal. If that's the case for you, consider adding an extra serving of vegetables, a piece of fresh fruit, or a few whole grain crackers topped with peanut butter almond butter, to give it a little more staying power.

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