

# How Did Cereal Become a Thing?

*by Pamela Fay*

Breakfast is the only meal with its own special foods. Although breakfast eaters routinely consume eggs, bacon, bagels, toast, pastries and even leftover pizza, cereal is what we reach for most often. According to a poll by ABC News, 31% of Americans eat cold cereal for breakfast, making it the most popular breakfast choice. It may seem to be simply a habitual choice for American consumers, but there are additional reasons behind cereal's ever-increasing popularity.

## **Convenience**

Ready-to-eat cereal requires no preparation or refrigeration and has a long shelf life. For busy individuals, a cereal-based meal is fast and convenient. You can stock a wide selection of cereals in the pantry so that even picky eaters and those with allergies have an option. Cereal gains popularity as fewer individuals actually know how to cook. Even children can pour a bowl of cereal, milk and juice. Cereal is also popular for travel. Parents may offer it to children as a treat during a day on the road or bring it along for breakfast-on-the-go. Employees can stash it in a workplace pantry for breakfast or a snack.

## **Expanded Use**

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania found that kids prefer cereal with a cartoon character on the box. This is not news to cereal marketers, who have used cartoons for years to make cereals that appeal to children. Prizes that appeared in cereal boxes in the 1950s and 60s add to this appeal. In addition to colorful graphics, cereal boxes tout recipes that have become popular desserts, such as crispy rice bars; snacks, such as party mix; entrees, such as baked "fried" chicken; and even other breakfast foods, such as low fat muffins. This was followed by extended product lines for based on commercial versions of these recipes, such as cereal bars and packaged snack mixes.

## **Sugar Fix**

Cereal, made predominantly of processed grains and sugar, is low fat. Some cereals are made healthier through the addition of whole grains like wheat, corn, millet or oats. However, a 2011 study by Consumer Reports found that 11 of the most popular breakfast cereals contain at least 40% sugar. Children aren't the only consumers. According to Consumer Reports, adults account for an estimated 58% of the "children's" cereal market. A Yale University researcher found that high sugar, low fiber cereals encourage over-consumption. Kids who were offered sugary cereals poured twice as much as children offered lower sugar options.

## **Advertising Dollars**

Cereal manufacturers fuel the demand for cereal through extensive advertising. In 2008, according to Nielsen, just one manufacturer, Kellogg, spent \$270 million dollars for cereal advertising (excluding online). Cereals that are not advertised benefit from the millions of dollars spent annually on promoting the category.

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