IT’S NO SECRET that bacon isn’t the healthiest food in the refrigerator. It’s high in cholesterol, salt and saturated fat. It is treated with natural or chemical nitrites—both of which are linked to cancer—leading the American Cancer Society and the American Institute for Cancer Research to recommend reducing or avoiding the consumption of bacon and other processed meats. And nearly all bacon and other pork products in your supermarket’s meat case come from factory-farmed pigs.

Even so, bacon has an enthusiastic fan base. A recent article in Bloomberg Businessweek traces the origins of “bacon mania” to a savvy campaign by the pork industry, which markets the product as a flavor enhancer for everything from fast-food burgers to milk shakes. Today, you can buy bacon-flavored cupcakes, vodka, cocoa mixes and coffee. Bacon has even crept into the fashion and sundries world, with “I ♥ Bacon” T-shirts, bacon-flavored toothpaste and bacon-scented perfumes and candles.

Fortunately, you can have your bacon without the grease and guilt.

What gives bacon its distinctive taste is not the meat itself but the salt and sometimes sugar and maple syrup that it’s cured with, which, together with the smoking process, create a sweet, smoky aroma that intensifies when cooking. The meat industry by no means owns this flavoring method. Creative cooks have discovered that soy products as well as carrots, portobello mushrooms, eggplant, zucchini and even raw jicama can be transformed into a tasty bacon substitute. Typical recipes involve marinating with maple syrup, liquid smoke and Bragg’s liquid amino acids; seasoning with spices such as bacon salt and paprika; and then dehydrating or baking the dish.

If you want something more convenient, natural foods stores and many supermarket chains now carry a variety of plant-based bacons made from tofu, tempeh (soybean cake), seitan (wheat gluten) or even coconut chips. Some brands are robust in flavor. Others are more subtle. It’s just a matter of finding one that complements the dish you’re making.
Here’s the lowdown on six popular products. You can substitute them for bacon in just about any recipe, including sandwiches, soups, casseroles, dips, dressings and even sweets.

Just one caveat: Except for Phoney Baloney’s Coconut Bacon chips, which can be eaten straight out of the package as a snack, most vegetarian bacons aren’t terribly tasty when served cold. Then again, neither is the porcine version.

### Fakin’ Products

#### Upton’s Naturals Bacon Seitan
These chewy and slightly sweet strips are marinated in soy sauce and natural hickory-smoke concentrate and spiced with paprika, sea salt and onion. Chopped bits can top salads, pizzas and baked potatoes. Whole strips taste great on veggie burgers and BLTs or as a breakfast side, with a whopping 15 grams of protein per serving.

**COST:** About $3.99 per 5-ounce pack

**AVAILABILITY:** Most natural foods stores in all 50 states

#### Phoney Baloney’s Coconut Bacon
Made with coconut chips, this product adds a sweet, smoky crunch when sprinkled on sandwiches, salads, pizzas, baked potatoes and even cookies and cupcakes. Or you can make like Elvis and add the chips to a peanut butter and banana sandwich for a PB&B. The company recently launched three new flavors. The chipotle barbecue is great in tacos. The apple fennel is good on pizza or in just about any Italian dish. Mix the candied version with any peanut-butter-based baked goods or sprinkle them on ice cream or French toast to titillate your taste buds.

**COST:** $5.49 per 3.5-ounce package

**AVAILABILITY:** See phoneybaloneys.com/retailers for a list of retailers.

#### Lightlife Fakin’ Bacon and Smart Bacon
While Lightlife’s tempeh-based Fakin’ Bacon tastes good on its own, its soy-based Smart Bacon is relatively bland. Nothing a little seasoning can’t fix—try liquid smoke, maple syrup or brown sugar, and a dash of soy sauce. Smart Bacon has a slightly salty, smoky flavor with a texture that lends itself to pizza toppings and morning breakfast strips. Fakin’ Bacon adds a rich, bold flavor to dishes and is perfect for baked-potato soup, Reuben sandwiches and scalloped potatoes.

**COST:** $4-5 per 5-ounce package

**AVAILABILITY:** Most natural foods stores and some major supermarket chains

#### Tofurky Smoky Maple Bacon Tempeh
This product has a smoky, maple-syrup sweetness and is delicious lightly sautéed in oil and added to sandwiches, stir-fries, pasta dishes and vegetarian sushi. You can also add it to soups, guacamole and other dips, stuffing and fried rice. It has a mouthwatering aroma when cooking. And, just like real bacon, it enhances the flavor of baked beans, collard greens and green beans.

**COST:** $3.99 per 7-ounce package

**AVAILABILITY:** Most natural foods stores and some major supermarket chains in the U.S and Canada

#### Sweet Earth Natural Foods Hickory and Sage Smoked Seitan Bacon
This product is similar in texture to Upton’s Bacon Seitan but with a slightly zestier flavor. It’s seasoned with hickory smoke, maple syrup, garlic, sea salt, cumin, sage and rosemary. The strips are quite tasty when pan-fried until slightly crisp. One online reviewer said they taste “heavenly” in a breakfast burrito. For something different, try them wrapped around warm dates or jalapeno poppers stuffed with nondairy cheddar and cream cheeses.

**COST:** $5-6 per 5.5-ounce package

**AVAILABILITY:** Visit Sweet Earth Natural Foods’ Facebook page for a list of stores.
TEMPEH BACON FETTUCCINE  SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

SAUCE:
7 ounces Tofurky Smoky Maple Bacon Tempeh
1/4 cup canola oil
1 medium onion, cut in 1/4-inch strips
1 red bell pepper, cut in 1/4-inch strips
2 garlic cloves, minced
2 ounces sun-dried tomatoes, julienned
1 cup cashew cream
1 cup vegetable stock
1/4 cup nutritional yeast flakes

CASHEW CREAM:
1 cup raw cashews, plus enough cold water to cover cashews

PASTA:
1 pound fettuccine, cooked

Recipe courtesy of Seth Tibbott of Turtle Island Foods

DIRECTIONS

CASHEW CREAM PREPARATION
1 Soak the cashews overnight in the refrigerator. Drain and rinse. Place the cashews in a high-speed blender. Add enough cold water to cover by two inches. Blend the mixture on high speed until very smooth and the consistency of half-and-half cream. If it’s too thick, add more water and blend a few more minutes.
2 Reserve the cream in the refrigerator. This can be prepared 2 to 3 days ahead. You will need at least 1 cup of cream.

SAUCE AND PASTA PREPARATION
1 Place a large, heavy-bottomed skillet on medium high heat. Add the oil and allow it to heat. Cook the tempeh bacon about 3 to 4 minutes on each side, until well browned. Turn and cook for another 3 to 4 minutes. Remove the skillet from the heat and drain the tempeh on a towel. When cool, cut each slice of tempeh into 3 pieces.
2 Return the pan to medium high heat and add the onions and peppers. Sauté until the onions turn translucent and begin to brown. Toss in the garlic and tomatoes and cook for another minute. Reduce the heat to medium and add 1 cup of the cashew cream, plus the vegetable stock, nutritional yeast and tempeh bacon. Reduce the sauce for 2 minutes by stirring over medium heat.
3 Adjust the sauce thickness by adding more cream (to thicken) or stock (to thin).
4 For each serving, pour a portion of the sauce over a portion of warm fettuccine.

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