

Battle of the Foods: 14 Winning Nutrition Picks

By Matthew G. Kadey, M.Sc., R.D.
Runner's World

As a health-savvy runner, you try to toss nutrient-packed foods into your grocery cart. But when you're deciding between similar-seeming nutritious items (say, turkey or chicken?), you may not know the superior choice. "Food is your fuel," says Mitzi Dulan, R.D., co-author of *The All-Pro Diet*. "Selecting the most nutritious options will improve your diet and give you a competitive edge." While you can't go wrong eating both quinoa and brown rice, choosing the nutritional champ may give your running the boost it needs. In a healthy-food smackdown, here are our winning picks.

STRAWBERRIES vs. BLUEBERRIES

Both are health all-stars, but a study in the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* reported that blueberries (particularly wild ones) showed the most antioxidant activity of all the fruits tested. "These antioxidants help keep your immune system strong," says Dulan, "and reduce muscle-tissue damage from exercise."

HEALTHY CHOICE: Mix blueberries into lean ground beef for burgers. The juicy fruit will help keep the meat moist.

CHICKEN BREAST vs. TURKEY BREAST

Both breast meats are free of saturated fat, but turkey has three additional grams of protein per three-ounce serving, plus more iron (which helps deliver oxygen to muscles) and selenium. "This mineral functions as part of an enzyme called glutathione peroxidase," says sports dietitian Suzanne Girard Eberle, R.D., author of *Endurance Sports Nutrition*. This enzyme works as an antioxidant to protect cells from free radicals that may contribute to cancer and heart disease.

HEALTHY CHOICE: Make your own lunch meat to avoid the excess sodium in much deli turkey. Bake turkey breasts, slice them thinly, and add to sandwiches.

PEANUT BUTTER vs. ALMOND BUTTER

Almond butter has more calcium and magnesium, a mineral that's often lacking in [runners'](#) diets and is important for muscle contraction. While the two nut butters contain about the same amount of fat, the almond variety has 60 percent more monounsaturated fat. "When consumed in place of saturated fat," says Dulan, "monounsaturated fat lowers harmful LDL levels to help decrease heart disease and stroke risk." Almond butter also has three times more vitamin E, an antioxidant that may reduce cancer risk.

HEALTHY CHOICE: Use almond butter instead of PB on your bagel. Blend it into a post-run smoothie, or stir it into oatmeal.

SPINACH vs. KALE

Kale's nutritional might would win over even Popeye. Gram for gram, kale contains four times more vitamin C, and one and a half times the amount of immune-boosting vitamin A and vitamin K. "Vitamin K ensures that blood clots properly," says Eberle, "but it's also needed to make a bone protein essential for strong, healthy bones." Kale contains three times more lutein and zeaxanthin, antioxidants deposited in the retina that work together to protect eye health.

HEALTHY CHOICE: Make kale "chips": Spread bite-sized pieces on a baking sheet. Spray with olive oil, season with salt, and bake for 15 minutes (until crisp).

COW'S MILK vs. GOAT'S MILK

When Spanish researchers compared cow's and goat's milk from animals raised under similar conditions, they found that both have the same amount of essential amino acids needed to repair and build muscle. But goat's milk contains a larger percentage of omega-3 fats, as well as calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, and conjugated linoleic acid (or CLA). Studies suggest CLA has a number of effects, including lowering cancer risk, improving bone health, and helping reduce body fat.

HEALTHY CHOICE: Use tangy, slightly sweet goat's milk (found at health-food stores) the same way as cow's milk—on cereal, in smoothies, and when baking.

WHEAT BREAD vs. RYE BREAD

According to a study in the *Nutrition Journal*, researchers in Sweden found that participants who ate rye bread for breakfast experienced less hunger later in the day compared with those who ate wheat bread. Hanna Isaksson, the lead study author, believes that rye's ability to quell hunger is due to its high fiber count. Rye can have up to eight grams of fiber per slice—even more than whole wheat.

HEALTHY CHOICE: Rye bread often contains some refined wheat flour, so to get the most fiber, buy "100 percent rye" loaves or make sure whole rye flour or meal is the first ingredient.

FAT BETTER: Earthy, rich-tasting extra-virgin olive oil contains more anti-inflammatory compounds than canola oil. Use it when you make dips, pesto, and vinaigrettes.

Quick Hits

Can you pick the best runner's staples?

Quinoa beats brown rice

WHY: Quinoa has three extra grams of protein per cooked cup, plus more fiber, iron, and magnesium.

Greek yogurt beats regular yogurt

WHY: The Greek variety has about twice as much protein as traditional types.

Green tea beats coffee

WHY: It's bursting with antioxidants (such as EGCG) that help ward off diabetes and certain cancers.

Pork tenderloin beats beef tenderloin

WHY: The pork version has less saturated [fat](#), more B vitamins, and is cheaper.

Goat cheese beats feta cheese

WHY: Goat cheese has nearly half the cholesterol and a third less sodium.

Orange beats apple

WHY: They have similar amounts of calories and fiber, but oranges have 12 times as much vitamin C.

Red pepper beats green pepper

WHY: It boasts eight times the vitamin A, which keeps [your](#) immune system strong.

Flaxseed beats flaxseed oil

WHY: The seeds have lots of magnesium, potassium, selenium, and fiber.