

Sharkies (Vegan, Gluten-Free, Nut-Free, Soy-Free)

Hannah Kaminsky, author of *My Sweet Vegan* - Picture this: You've just had a tough hike up one of the rockiest, tallest mountains you've ever tried to tackle, and your energy is running low. Reaching into your backpack to refuel, you pull out a pack of re-energizing Gummy snacks? A strange concept for those used to the traditional sports gels and power bars, Sharkies happen to be fruit chews that are marketed as a source of electrolytes and complex carbohydrates meant to aid endurance and stamina. Made of all unrefined and quality ingredients bound together with pectin instead of the usual gelatin derived from animal bones, these organic munchies are surprisingly vegan, too. Now I may not be athletically inclined or in need of an energy boost to help me through the day, but finding vegan gummies is a rare treat in itself, so for my purposes these "healthy" candies were just a special treat. Pouring the contents of the "Fruit Splash" packet out to view what I expected to be some mangled, unidentifiable shapes, I was delighted to see figures that actually looked like sharks spill onto my napkin! Most fruit snacks that I had previously indulged in during my pre-vegan days were more like nondescript blobs no matter what they were designated as on the box, so these already seemed to have a leg-up on the competition. Brightly colored and smelling of a mixed fruit salad, I was excited that such intense shades and scents were derived from only natural, plant sources, as opposed to those mysterious chemicals so frequently used as dyes or flavorings. Sporting a range of tones that included a light red (cherry), dark red/magenta (blackberry), yellow (lemon), and orange (tangerine), this pack has all the flavors offered by sharkies, but individual packs of just the berries or just the citrus are also available, so you can pick and choose your favorites instead of getting stuck with some extras that you don't care for. Jumping right into the shark tank and shoveling a cherry piece into my mouth, I was expecting nothing spectacular as I'm not a real fan of the fruit itself, and much less artificial flavors that try to mimic it. After one soft bite yielding to a springy chewiness, I was taken aback by how pleasant the light fruity flavor was. Modestly sweetened and in no way overwhelming, it seemed like an excellent balance that would satisfy one's sweet tooth without leading to a sugar coma shortly after. Moving directly to the blackberry shark to compare the two berry offerings, I found that this had a deeper flavor that was definitely a nice variation on the first without being so different that it would clash. I'm certain that if you were to blind fold me and ask me which piece was which, I would be able to accurately determine the answer. Swimming to the citrus side of the pool, I snatched up a lemon shark first, chewing to slight disappointment at first. Beginning with a very mild flavor I found myself underwhelmed, but as I continued to chew the small aquatic creature, it developed into a sharper, more pronounced citrus bite. I really loved what a bright flavor it became, and without being the least bit sour. The tangerine was a bit more mild, but still made for a pleasant contrast to the other flavors in the pack. All in all, I would have to say that if you're looking for real, fresh-tasting fruit flavors then try a real, fresh fruit instead. Nothing can really replicate that taste, even using all-natural sources, but these gummies were still fruity all the same, and without any sort of chemical aftertaste to boot. The pack that I consumed had a nice variety with at least two sharks in each flavor, providing enough interest that I could eat the whole pack without it becoming boring or monotonous. Kids would absolutely love the fun shapes and sweet taste, and I'm sure that parents would love the fact that they're portion-controlled and made of quality ingredients. Far and away the best gummies I can remember sampling, vegan or not, I would definitely pick up these chewy creatures again, even if I can't vouch for their re-energizing claims! Hannah Kaminsky is the author of the indulgent dessert cookbook, *My Sweet Vegan*. She also keeps a personal blog of crafts, baking and photography at Bittersweet Blog.