

Plant-Forward Menus

What Is Happening and Where Are We Headed?



By [Jeff Dover](#)
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Some people choose plant-based diets to prevent cruelty to animals while others choose such diets for cultural or religious reasons. Other benefits and reasons to choose plant-based diets include:

- Health benefits including improving heart health, benefits to your immune system, weight loss, reduced blood pressure, prevention of Type 2 diabetes, greater longevity, decreased risk of cancer, improved cholesterol levels, decreased risk of a stroke, reduced arthritic pain and improved brain health.
- Eating plant-based foods reduces an individual's carbon footprint. Research by Poore and Nemecek indicates that the agri-food system contributes between 20% to 35% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and that plant-based proteins cause lower emissions than animal-based proteins.
- In most cases, plant-based proteins are less expensive than animal proteins.
- A study in the Journal of Clinical and Aesthetic Dermatology indicates that plant-based diets can lengthen telomeres, which prevents cellular damage and slows skin aging. In effect, plant-based diets can make you look younger!



Plant-based diets are increasing and not just for those that are vegetarians or vegans. More and more people are trying to incorporate additional fruits and vegetables into their diets and are choosing to increase the number of plant-based meals they consume. Plant-forward diets do not mean no animal proteins; they feature fruits and vegetables.

In 2020, retail sales of plant-based goods increased 27% over the previous year to \$7 billion, and that figure is expected to grow to \$10.7 billion by 2027. Vegan News reports that Americans following plant-based diets have increased by 9.6 million in the last 15 years and now represent 3% of the total population. The increasing plant-based diet trend was consistent across the country with every census region realizing growth of over 25% in the same 15-year period. For comparison purposes, the U.S. retail food market grew 15% over the same time frame. According to the Good Food Institute, 57% of U.S. households in 2020 purchased plant-based foods, an increase of 53% over 2019. Many people who do not want to fully commit to vegan or vegetarian diets are looking to add more fruits and vegetables and reduce the amount of meat in their diets.



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Not only are consumers increasing their plant-based diets at home, they are spending more on such menu items when dining out. A study by Foodable Labs shows that vegan options on U.S. restaurant menus have increased 300% and the sales of these items has increased 13% over the past year. Few restaurant chains do not have plant-based entrees on their menus. Clearly, the food service industry has taken notice.

The plant-forward trend has led to tremendous growth in plant-based meats, which has become the third largest plant-based grocery category after plant-based milk and other dairy. Companies such as Impossible Foods, Beyond Meat, Tyson, MorningStar Farms and others have made significant capital investments in plants to produce plant-based meat, seafood, poultry and eggs. After plant-based milk, plant-based meat is the greatest plant-based food category with sales of \$2.5 billion in 2020, a 45% growth over the previous year. The products taste great and, in most cases, are increasingly indistinguishable from their animal protein counterparts.

While plant-based meats may be a healthier choice when compared to animal proteins, they are not as healthy as other plant-based entrees. Plant-based meats contain a high amount of sodium and are highly processed. Perusing the ingredients, you will find a significant number of additives and ingredients you can't pronounce. For this reason, I think plant-based meat is a trend that won't last. Consumers have become increasingly averse to processed foods. Many restaurants have revised their recipes to provide clean ingredient decks and are actively promoting these changes to consumers. For example, hamburger patties are being made without additives, fillers, etc. and advertised as such — e.g., 100% hormone-free beef. Highly processed and high-sodium foods are being rejected by consumers with the current exception of plant-based meats, which in my opinion is unsustainable.



Don't get me wrong, plant-based diets are becoming more important to U.S. consumers. The benefits of increasing plant-based diets are significant and such diets will continue to grow as people seek out healthier options. This is especially true with younger consumers, who have surpassed the baby boomers as the most prolific restaurant customers. A study by the International Food Information Council showed consumers have both increasing awareness and a negative attitude toward processed foods.

The closer plant-based foods are to their natural form, the lower the cost. Plant-based meats, definitely not close to the plants' natural form, are typically more expensive than their animal-based counterparts. Plant-based menu choices closer to their natural are less expensive, which is another benefit for both the consumer and food provider.

Plant-based diets will continue to grow. However, I believe the growth will come from whole food options, vegan and vegetarian recipes, etc., as opposed to the highly processed plant-based meats. I recommend restaurateurs and hoteliers look past plant-based meats that may not be as healthy or align with other trends such as using whole foods and natural ingredients. Perhaps look to cultural cuisines that are traditionally plant-based or reduced animal protein for exciting, innovative alternatives for the menu.

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