Understanding the rise of alternative meat

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Alternative meat has been around for a long time, but in recent years, it has seen an extraordinary rise in popularity – from a decidedly niche market to one that is seeing broad acceptance for its perceived benefits of better nutrition and a more sustainable approach to food.

These products are clearly having a moment, but food companies also need to understand what prompted this shift and if it is a bellwether for a new paradigm in product development and food production.

Meatless "meats" have come a long way from their humble roots in 1970's vegetarian culture. Today's alternative meats utilize plant-based ingredients that are designed to look and taste like meat, instead of just replacing it. Plant-based meat alternatives are made with proteins from botanical sources such as soy or peas, and then combined with other plant-based ingredients to create a meat-like texture.

What is markedly different now is that the new plant-based ingredients have come a long way in mimicking the taste and mouthfeel of real meat, and the products are designed not just for vegans and vegetarians, but primarily for meat eaters, who may be looking for plant-based alternatives.

This strategy shift has made meat alternatives big business. Globally, the meat substitutes market reached $18,831 million in 2019, according to data from Euromonitor International. While Asia Pacific is the largest market due to consumption of meat substitutes like tofu, Western Europe, North America and Australasia lead the meat analogue market with the rise of innovative products that imitate the appearance of processed meats.[1] The United States is the largest of these markets, in part due to alternative meats' recent and strong entry into food service. Plant-based meats in the U.S., in particular, have seen solid growth, reaching $939 million in 2019 on growth of 18.4%.[2]

While the statistics look good, it is important to understand the drivers of this somewhat unexpected trajectory. Beyond the improved meat-like taste and functionality of plant-protein ingredients, several other factors have contributed to the rise of meat alternatives. Notably, consumers' attitudes about the their diet's impact on health have changed. These shoppers believe that their dietary choices not only have consequences for their personal health, but also environmental and animal welfare considerations.

This shift is clearly supported by consumer data:

- **41% of global consumers perceive plant-based foods as "healthier"** than animal-based products.[3]
- **28% are now eating more plant-based proteins,** and 17% say they are eating meat alternatives.[4]
- **55% believe plant proteins to be more sustainable** than animal products.[5]
- **One in three Americans now opts for meat-free days,** with 35% now noting they get most of their protein from sources other than red meat.[6]
- **29% of Americans now make food and beverage choices based on animal welfare,** and one in four do so for environmental reasons.[7]

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In particular, young consumers age 18-34 are embracing these ideas, with 37% now saying they are eating more protein from plant-based sources, as compared to 24% of those aged 35 and over.[8]

At the root of it, consumers say they are seeking alternative sources of protein for both their individual health and the health of the planet. This does not mean there is a surge in vegetarians or vegans: only about 7% identify as the former and 3% as the latter.[9] But these ideas have prompted the emergence of flexitarians, a growing consumer segment that is actively seeking to reduce meat consumption, but not eliminate it altogether.

Flexitarians make up an exponentially broader audience for meat alternatives. But attitudes about these products are evolving. The 2020 Food and Health Survey conducted by the International Food Information Council (IFIC) noted that while increasing numbers of consumers are receptive to plant-based alternative meats, three in 10 also say they never consume these products.[10] This may be a matter of access to these foods, but broader wholesale use may also come down to the pervasiveness of consumer belief in the advantages of these products.

A sensory experience

Another rising differentiator for alternative meats is protein source, according to the 2020 Euromonitor report, especially for label-reading consumers looking for a new experience. Soy protein remains a top ingredient, along with pea protein. But as soy-free claims become more common, ingredients like pea protein may be blended with a wide variety of other protein sources, ranging from hemp and fava beans to insects, which are being used to attain unique flavors and texture.

As acceptance increases for alternative meats, companies are advancing the technology, according to the Euromonitor report. For example, leaders in the field are continuously working to improve taste and the multisensory experience of the products to better mimic the juiciness of real meat and the way it browns on the outside and stays red in the middle.[11] Fish substitutes are also emerging, although for the time being, they are most accepted in Asia Pacific. However, as over-fishing gains attention in other markets around the world, these products may also hold significant market potential. And on the horizon is protein made from thin air – a process in which microbes are used to break down carbon dioxide gas (CO_2) into a substance that can be purified into a protein isolate.

While most consumers seem willing to accept new technologies to create foods that offer both nutrition and sustainability, they also have a desire to stick with what's familiar to them.[12] So manufacturers will have to walk a fine line as they progress in this category. Ultimately, it comes down to key perceptions and the eating experience – meat alternatives that taste good and imitate the enjoyment of eating meat will be core to product acceptance.

SOURCES:

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[7] The Hartman Group. "Sustainability 2019: Beyond Business as Usual." https://www.hartman-group.com/infographics/2134426758/conscientious-consumption-considering-sustainability-in-food-beverage-shopping

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[9] Ibid. HFI.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid. Euromonitor International Passport.

[12] The Hartman Group. "Food and Technology 2019. From Plant-Based to Lab Grown."

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