



Plant-based revolution: What's next?

Eating more fruits and vegetables has traditionally been a tough sell for many people. But as consumers learn more about the importance of the nutrients these foods provide, they are now embracing the idea of plant-based eating in a big way.

In fact, the trend is now considered mainstream, with the plant-based food market valued at \$7.4 billion in 2021 on a three-year sales increase of 54%, according to new data from the Plant Based Foods Association and the Good Food Institute.¹

So what changed to give plant-based eating such broad appeal? Beyond the recognition that these nutrients are important for personal health and wellness, plant-based products also align with consumer sensibilities around an eating style that supports planetary health. They reflect a balanced approach to diet that leaves room for variety and personalization... and with so many products now available, it has become increasingly easy to swap out traditional meat and dairy for plant-based alternatives.²

The COVID-19 pandemic also contributed to the growth of these attitudes, as consumers became more conscious of their dietary choices, citing health concerns.

Since the pandemic began:

39% of U.S. consumers considered going vegetarian or vegan

41% of self-described dieters said they increase protein intake from plant sources, and 28% noted eating more plant-based alternatives

Source: FONA International. "2021 Trend Insight – The Opportunity in Plant-Based."

This growing consumer demand, along with brand innovation, has created new products across the spectrum, expanding from the early staples of plant-based meat and dairy alternatives to new categories like plant-based meal kits, dressings, snacks and convenience foods.

But meeting these demands requires a keen understanding of the plant-based consumer. They don't necessarily fall into an easily definable category.

According to insights from The Hartman Group, consumers who follow a wide range of diet regimens are trying plant-based products because they fit well with modern notions of holistic health.³

48%

of consumers now say they look for products labeled as plant-based

31%

say they seek plant-based proteins in their diet

Source: The Hartman Group. "Myths and Realities Behind the Plant-Based Trend."

Interestingly, few of these consumers identify as vegetarian (6%), vegan (4%) or even flexitarian (10%), according to the Hartman research. The most common way these consumers identify themselves is as omnivores (43%), saying they eat a bit of everything with no restrictions.⁴

That noted, health is clearly a leading reason that consumers choose plant-based products, according to an Innova Market Insights 2020 consumer survey, with 53% citing this globally. But it's not the only reason. Consumers also said that they like the variety, sustainability and taste of plant-based products.⁵

Promising opportunities

While there is a high level of trust in the safety and correct labeling of plant-based foods among receptive shoppers like flexitarians, many also believe there is too little choice among these products, and they are often perceived as too expensive.⁶

Looking ahead, this indicates some key opportunities. Plant-based positioning is already featured on a variety of products beyond the major categories of plant-based meat and dairy alternatives, and Innova analysts are predicting continued expansion into categories including prepared meals, sauces and dressings, spreads and snacks.⁷

However, because there is such a broad definition, innovation, new choices, product positioning and price will be increasingly critical in the category. Consumers' growing interest in these products is also prompting an added level of scrutiny about claims and processing.⁸ For instance, consumers are particularly noting growing concern about ingredients and processing levels in plant-based meat alternatives, so more astute shoppers may search for simpler options.

This will likely propel use of plant-based proteins, including rice, beans and pea proteins as well as other botanical sources. According to data from Innova Market Insights, fava bean and hemp proteins were the fastest-growing plant-based proteins in meat and dairy alternative products between 2017 and 2019.⁹ Looking ahead, they predict use of an even wider variety of plant-based protein ingredients, along with blends of both plant- and animal-based proteins in sports nutrition products, beverages and meat alternatives.

Plant-based prospects

But no matter how new and novel the product concept is, taste and texture will continue to be essential elements in plant-based alternatives, especially when targeting the more mainstream consumer. According to data from FMCG Gurus, more than 80% of consumers note flavor as an influential factor in their product choices, and one in five global consumers is currently still leery about the texture of plant-based alternative products.¹⁰ These analysts note that meaty flavors like chicken and beef have ongoing appeal and represent an opportunity for brands to attract consumers who like these flavors but also want to reduce their meat consumption.

It's also important in these products to mask off-putting notes, like earthy or grassy flavors, and balance texture, color and aroma elements, all of which work synergistically to provide a satisfactory experience.

Keeping taste and texture requirements in mind is especially important when expanding into new plant-based categories like snacks, which represent a growing portion of the plant-based food market. This segment is seeing plenty of innovation, with products like lentil-based chips, mushroom jerkies, nut-based cheeses and frozen desserts made with ingredients like avocado. Plant-based meal kits and seafood entrees are other emerging options featuring plant-based sauces that are both spicy and creamy.

Plant-based ingredients with stronger nutritional profiles will also take center stage in upcoming plant-based products. Superfoods like broccoli, sweet potatoes, legumes and chia seeds provide nutritional value, together with appealing flavor and strong health perceptions that will enhance the appeal of products like bowls and frozen meals.

Clearly, plant-based ingredients will become rising stars across virtually every food and beverage category, so brands will have ongoing opportunity to reinvent their products or create new foods and beverages to meet the demands of this expanding plant-centric consumer base. But while the opportunities for these products are increasingly wide open, product developers would be wise to make formulas simple and always keep taste and texture requirements top-of-mind. This will lead to new products that have both novel appeal and staying power in the market.

Partner with Cargill for palate-pleasing plant proteins. cargill.com/plantprotein

¹ Plant Based Foods Association. Retail Sales Data for 2021. <https://www.plantbasedfoods.org/retail-sales-data/>

² The Hartman Group. "Myths and Realities Behind the Plant-Based Trend." September 23, 2021. <https://www.hartman-group.com/infographics/1635781807/myths-realities-behind-the-plant-based-trend>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Innova Market Insights. "Powering Up on Plant Protein." March 24, 2021. <https://www.innovamarketinsights.com/press-release/powering-up-on-plant-protein/>

⁶ Innova Market Insights. "Choice and Price Key to Continued Boom in Plant-Based Foods." November 8, 2021. <https://www.innovamarketinsights.com/press-release/Choice-and-price-key-to-continued-boom-in-plant-based-foods>

⁷ Innova Market Insights. "Plant-Forward: Evolving Consumer Demands Drive Innovation in Plant-Based Eating." September 29, 2021. <https://www.innovamarketinsights.com/press-release/plant-forward-evolving-consumer-demands-drive-innovation-in-plant-based-eating>

⁸ The Hartman Group. "Plant-Based Eating Trends: Label Scrutiny." July 1, 2021. <https://www.hartman-group.com/infographics/2137711995/plant-based-eating-trends-label-scrutiny>

⁹ Ibid. Innova Market Insights. "Powering Up on Plant Protein."

¹⁰ FMCG Gurus. "The Importance of Taste, Texture in Plant-Based Food." January 29, 2021.

<https://fmcggurus.com/blog/fmcg-gurus-the-importance-of-taste-texture-in-plant-based-food/>

¹¹ FONA International. "2021 Trend Insight: The Opportunity in Plant-Based." April 12, 2021. <https://www.fona.com/0421plantbased/>