



The new flexitarians

Understanding the rise of flexible eating styles

The more consumers learn about diet and health, the more they understand that there's no single "right" way to eat. As a result, they're experimenting with new dietary approaches to find what works well for an individual lifestyle, while also supporting overall wellness and aligning with personal values.

These attitudes have certainly been behind the rising popularity of plant-based eating, which is now a top eating trend for 2022, according to Innova Market Insights. Their research suggests that consumers are choosing plant-based alternatives because they consider them to be healthier and better for the planet.¹ But that's not the only reason – these consumers also indicate a desire for variety.

This helps explain the rising appeal of flexitarianism. For some, a flexitarian diet allows followers to choose a range of options when they want to, without having to adhere to more-regimented vegetarian, vegan or keto diets. Some consumers find a flexitarian approach desirable because it allows them to adapt their diets as life demands, shifting from keto to plant-based and eating animal-based products – or eschewing them – without defined rules.

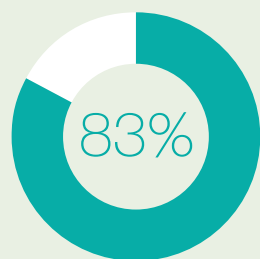
According to research from Packaged Facts, the uptick in plant-based eating suggests a wider acceptance of flexitarianism, as vegan and vegetarian populations remain

fairly stable.² The research noted that the idea of a holistic approach is another important concept to these consumers, because flexitarians don't typically eliminate dairy or meat altogether; but rather believe that eating more vegetables and fruits, along with less meat and dairy, represents a well-balanced diet.

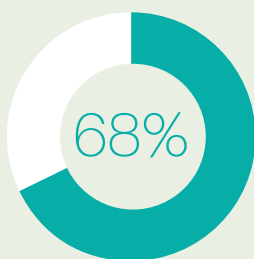
So beyond the desire for flexibility and balance, what differentiates the flexitarian eater?

First, it is important to note that this dietary lifestyle is relatively new, with many of those who practice it noting they have only been doing so for about 12 months – so what we know about them is limited and evolving quickly, according to research from FMCG Gurus. The analysts also noted that 93% of flexitarians say they only eat meat occasionally, which suggests that only a small percentage identify as flexitarians because they are seeking to reduce or eliminate dairy intake while continuing to eat meat.³

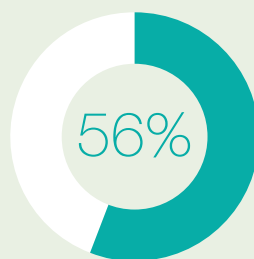
FLEXITARIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD MEAT ALTERNATIVES



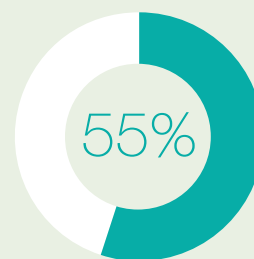
83% of flexitarians say it's important that meat alternatives are 100% natural



68% of flexitarians say they find meaty flavors appealing



56% of flexitarians have made attempts to reduce their meat intake in the last 12 months



55% of flexitarians say they eat meat alternatives

Source: FMCG Gurus. "Understanding Flexitarian Attitudes Towards Meat Analogues." May 6, 2021.

These findings suggest that flexitarian consumers are not fully committed to a meatless lifestyle and may struggle to reduce their meat intake over the long haul. This also likely portends that a satisfying taste and texture will be important to these consumers.⁴

The conversation about flexitarian diets today has become more food-centric than it was in 2020, as consumers now express the belief that eating plant-based is easier than ever, according to research from Relative Insights. Being flexitarian also helps consumers feel more connected and empowered, the researchers noted, because they believe that eating less meat is having an impact on the environment and the world around them.⁵

This is clear messaging to manufacturers of plant-based products, as these ideas take root in the mainstream. Strong nutritional content and label-friendly ingredients are important in both the plant-based meat alternative and dairy-alt categories, but these more-mainstream consumers will be especially discriminating about taste.⁶

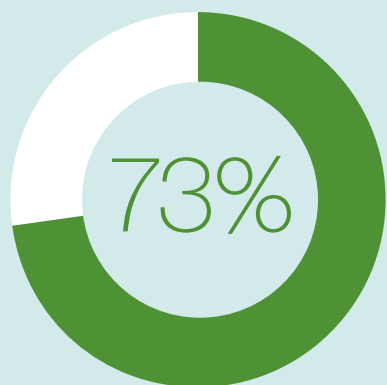
In meat alternatives, for example, they are looking for plant-based alternatives that have those meaty flavors and an appearance like their animal-based counterparts.

Similar rules apply in plant-based dairy alternatives. According to proprietary Cargill research, 53% of respondents consume both plant-based and animal-based dairy products.⁸ Because they are familiar with the taste of these products – and switch back and forth – they have high expectations. They note that flavor and authentic taste are key attributes.

So, getting taste and texture right is critical. But animal proteins have a big job in both dairy and meat products, so formulators have to replicate those roles in plant-based versions. Luckily, innovators in the space have made significant advances in addressing these challenges. Choosing a plant-based protein with a clean, mild flavor profile and a strong fit to the application is a good place to start.

Soy proteins have paved the way as one of the first key ingredients used to help replicate taste, bite and fibers in plant-based meat alternatives. More recently, pea proteins have taken the spotlight in plant-based products. In particular, those made from yellow pea seed varieties have proven to address some of the earthy tones and bitter notes common in other pulses. Cargill has partnered with PURIS™ to create pea protein ingredients that work well in plant-based applications, thanks to their neutral flavor. These pea proteins also offer enhanced functionality, with water-binding and emulsification properties that handle some of the key hurdles in providing texture in alternative products. But hydrocolloids, such as carrageenan, may also be needed to assist with gel formation and water retention. In addition, starches can be used to provide a binder system that creates a balance between juiciness and bite.

In dairy products, animal proteins create the rich, creamy texture that people desire. While no single plant protein can fully replace these animal proteins, peas do come close. To help them along, formulators can pair them with ingredients like fibers and pectins to build back stability and mouthfeel, while controlling syneresis.



**of consumers say
they prefer products that
are brown in color.⁷**

Environmental standards are increasingly important in plant-protein selection. PURIS pea proteins are sustainably grown and produced, with no solvents used in processing. Peas are also grown as cover crops to help farmers reduce soil erosion and boost nitrogen levels, eliminating the need for nitrogen inputs that can overflow and create environmental issues. What's more, PURIS pea proteins are grown and manufactured in North America, which offers a reduced footprint compared to other pea proteins grown or processed abroad.

Whether they are flexitarians, vegans, vegetarians or omnivores, most consumers today are looking for products that offer a little bit of everything – health, nutrition, satisfaction and even a bit of indulgence.

As ingredients and formulation techniques continue to produce products that better meet these demands, this segment will continue to expand... which ultimately, is good news for a healthier and more sustainable food system.

Discover a full portfolio of ingredients to satisfy any eating style — together with expert formulation support — at cargill.com/labelfriendly.

PURIS™ Pea Protein is a trademark of PURIS Foods, a Cargill strategic partner.

References

- ¹ Innova Market Insights. "Shared Planet Leads Innova Market Insights Top Ten Trends for 2022." October 13, 2021. <https://www.innovamarketinsights.com/press-release/shared-planet-leads-innova-market-insights-top-ten-trends-for-2022/>
- ² Packaged Facts. "Flexitarianism on the Rise in U.S." in the report, *Vegan, Vegetarian and Flexitarian Consumers*. October 29, 2020. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/flexitarianism-on-the-rise-in-us-reports-packaged-facts-301154622.html>
- ³ FMCG Gurus. "Understanding Flexitarian Attitudes Towards Meat Analogues." May 6, 2021. <https://fmcggurus.com/blog/fmcg-gurus-understanding-flexitarian-attitudes-towards-meat-substitutes/>
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid. Relative Insight.
- ⁶ Cargill Proprietary Research. "Plant-Based Dairy and Meat – Consumer Research." February 2021.
- ⁷ Ibid. FMCG Gurus.
- ⁸ Cargill Proprietary Research. "Transcending Alternatives. The Continued Rise of Plant-Based Dairy Alternatives." 2021.