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The new generation of veggie burgers

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A new version of the Beyond Meat's vegan burger. Beyond Meat uses protein from foods like rice, mung beans, mustard seed and sunflower seeds in its products. (Angel Franco/The New York Times)

There's a bumper crop of options in the new generation of meat substitutes, ranging from intriguing pairings of grains and beans, which make no attempt to resemble meat, to meat "analogues" — realistic approximations of beef and chicken made from plant proteins and other ingredients.

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On Nutrition

The veggie burger market is starting to look a lot like ... meat. There's a bumper crop of options in the new generation of meat substitutes, ranging from intriguing pairings of grains and beans, which make no attempt to resemble meat, to meat "analogues" — realistic approximations of beef and chicken made from plant proteins and other ingredients. How realistic? In some stores, they are sold alongside actual meat. They aren't your grandmother's Gardenburger or Boca Burger.

I've tried faux chicken patties and sausages that were stunningly close to the real thing, but a hamburger? In the interest of research, my husband and I shared a VG Beyond Burger at Veggie Grill, then walked to a brewpub to share a beef burger. To my surprise, the flavor really was similar — although my husband thought the Beyond Burger had a better texture. Both were tasty, but neither was as flavorful as the grass-fed beef we buy from a small local ranch.

Who's going faux?

Melissa Abbott, a vice president at [The Hartman Group](#), a Bellevue-based consumer insights and market research firm, has been watching the ebb and flow of the meat-substitute market over the last few decades. She said health concerns, primarily heart disease and fear of saturated fat, used to be the driver of faux-meat sales. "Now we're in an era where meat analogues are looking a lot different, and they are on the verge of taking over in a way they never had," she said. "It might not be quite the same texture as meat, but it comes closer than it ever has before, and they're in places where you wouldn't expect to see them in years past."

Are Americans ready to give up their meat? Abbott said no — but more and more people want their meat to be sustainable. They're also more likely to eat like flexitarians, even if they don't call themselves that. "They're eating less meat, and it's easier than it ever has been before," she said.

Indeed, Ethan Brown, founder and CEO of [Beyond Meat](#), said the Beyond Burger is now available in the meat case at more than 10,000 grocery stores — including stores in Seattle — and on the menu at more than 10,000 restaurants and other dining establishments. The company just expanded its production capabilities with a huge new research and development center in Los Angeles. "Whether you're a hard-core carnivore or a strict vegan, you should be able to have our burger, enjoy what you're eating and feel great afterward," he said.

California-based registered dietitian [Matt Ruscigno, MPH, RD](#), past chair of the vegetarian group of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the chief nutrition officer at Nutrinic, a plant-based health-care startup, said the target audience for most of the newer vegan meat substitutes are people who eat meat and enjoy the taste. “It’s brilliant. Large-scale change happens when people don’t have to alter their behavior, because their food environment has improved,” he said. “Yes, there are people who will steadfastly continue to demand meat but there are a lot of people, the so-called ‘movable middle,’ who will switch out animal meat for vegan meat if it’s convenient and available at places they are already going. Additionally it gives meat-avoiders options at restaurants that traditionally have not had them, which makes social eating situations easier.”

Seattle registered dietitian [Ginger Hultin, MS, RDN](#), a spokeswoman for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, agrees that omnivores who do enjoy including meat in their diet but want to reduce intake for health or environmental reasons are likely to choose substitutes that re-create a meatlike texture, color and flavor, but vegans and vegetarians who avoid meat in support of health, animal welfare or the environment may still enjoy a “meatlike” product.

“Plant-based diets are [more environmentally sustainable](#) than diets rich in animal products because they use fewer natural resources and are associated with much less environmental damage,” she said “The average American will consume over 200 pounds of meat in 2018 so replacing even some of that with meat analogues could save a lot of animals and greatly reduce saturated fat intake while increasing fiber, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.”

More than one way to go plant-based

Abbott said some consumers of meat substitutes are primarily concerned with the impact of their food choices on the environment and animal welfare. “They don’t really care what it’s made of.” But others do care. And soy is not popular. “Unless they are getting it in tofu and tempeh, they feel that it isn’t a traditional soy product.”

Whereas old-school faux meats relied heavily on soy protein isolate or wheat gluten, today’s producers of meat analogues tend to use pea protein isolate. “I have no issue with soy and consume quite a bit myself,” Brown said, “but given consumer concerns about it, using an alternative like peas make sense.” Beyond Meat also uses protein from foods like rice, mung beans, mustard seed and sunflower seeds in its products.

Currently, pea protein is showing up in everything from energy bars to the protein powders you might add to your smoothies. “That to me is a signal that food marketers need to watch out for this, in terms of human health, because it’s everywhere,” Abbott said. She points out that chickpea flour, which is also showing up in some veggie burgers, is less processed than soy and pea protein, but it’s also less meatlike. Other products use whole foods like millet and adzuki beans, and may be easily embraced by food-curious Americans. “Our palates have evolved.”

Ruscigno said the consensus among nutrition professionals is that overall diet — not one single food — is what matters most, and that nutrient-rich whole [plant foods should be the basis of that diet](#). “With that said, vegan meats can play a role,” he said. “Most are high in protein and they can improve satiability while giving a familiar taste and texture to those who grew up eating animal foods. While they can be part of a healthy diet, they are not required.”

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