

LIVING

Why all your favorite burger chains are going vegetarian

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A meatless "Impossible Slider" sits on a table at a White Castle restaurant in Queens.

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Burger restaurants are beefing up their vegetarian options.

As more customers go vegan or vegetarian, eateries such as Shake Shack, White Castle and Bareburger are adding more plant-based dishes to balance out their meaty menus.

Shake Shack is introducing a new veggie burger at select New York City shacks on Thursday to complement its existing meatless Shroomburger (a deep-fried, cheese-stuffed mushroom on a bun). The Veggie Shack patty (\$7.29) is made with black beans, brown rice and roasted beets, topped with provolone cheese, lettuce, onions, pickles, vegan mustard and vegan mayo. The taste is said to mimic the crisp char of a grilled beef burger and it can be served in a lettuce wrap or a gluten-free bun made in-house.

"We continue to listen to our guests and have heard their desire for a complimentary, lighter veggie option," Randy Garutti, CEO at Shake Shack, told Moneyish. "Hopefully it will meet guests' needs — offering an

equally fun and enjoyable option for our vegetarian, vegan and meat-loving fans alike.”

Danny Meyer’s burger chain is the latest fast food joint to debut a new veggie burger. White Castle, which is infamous for its square beef sliders, announced earlier this month that it’s now serving the Impossible Burger. The 100 percent plant-based hamburger substitute mimics the taste and molecular structure of beef so that it actually bleeds, sans hormones, antibiotics or artificial flavors. It’s comprised of potato protein, soy, wheat, coconut oil and an iron-filled chemical called heme that causes the burger to bleed. The lab-grown burgers from Silicon Valley startup Impossible Foods have infiltrated hundreds of restaurants throughout the country since hitting the market in 2016, including Mark Wahlburg’s [Boston-based Wahlburgers chain](#), Bareburger and Umami Burger.

The plant-based varieties are getting great feedback from customers, like New Jersey senator Cory Booker, who went nuts over White Castle’s Impossible Sliders.

“What is it about vegan fast food that makes this senator feel like the kid again whose mother just let him lick the spoon as she is making icing for a big cake,” Booker captioned a photo of a tray of burgers and crinkle-cut fries on Instagram.



Some veggie options are even selling on par with their meaty counterparts. When the Impossible Burger launched on Bareburger menus in 2016, its sales equaled the beef-based burgers, the restaurant confirmed to Moneyish. It gained so much traction that they introduced Beyond Burgers, another plant-based patty variety made with non-GMO pea protein (which is 35 percent vegetarian) in February.

“The addition of the Beyond and Impossible Burgers answers the rising consumer demand for healthier, plant-based restaurant options that still deliver on taste and satisfaction,” Bareburger CEO Euripides Pelekanos told Moneyish.

At Bareburger, 15 percent of total menu sales come from veggie burgers, despite having a menu dominated primarily by meat options. And White Castle says it sold more than 350 Impossible Sliders in a day at some of the 140 chains where the plant-based patties are currently sold. The chain plans to roll out the Impossible Sliders nationally at all 385 restaurants next.

“We don’t expect it [the Impossible slider] will be equivalent to the number of original sliders we sell, but the response has been dramatic in terms of buzz and spurring people to come to visit. This is something we see as not a fad, but a new normal in terms of customers who really want the great taste of the food they crave and a plant-based option,” Jamie Richardson, vice president of White Castle, told Moneyish.

Shake Shack’s the Veggie Shack.

Courtesy of Shake Shack

Eating animal-free is on the rise. Six percent of Americans identify as vegan, up from 1 percent in 2014, according to GlobalData’s “Top Trends in Prepared Foods in 2017” report – a 600% increase in just three years. And the plant-based food sector tops \$3.1 billion in sales, up 8.1 percent over last year, [according to new data](#) from Nielsen, The Good Food Institute and the Plant Based Foods Association.

“Veggie burgers used to be a very ‘blah’ item. When you saw it on the menu, it was to satisfy the few people they thought would probably order it,” restaurant consultant Jason Kaplan, who has worked with vegetarian-focused restaurants like Life Cafe and burger eatery The Dog House, told Moneyish. “Now there’s a demand for better quality and healthier options that aren’t just your black bean base.”

And restaurants are feeding that need. Pizza Hut rolled out a dairy-free pizza pie last fall made with Violife cheese, following Domino’s foray into the meatless market with its own vegan cheese version in Israel. Similarly, Ben & Jerry’s expanded its almond milk-based vegan flavors to include varieties like the Coconut Seven Layer Bar and customer-favorite Cherry Garcia in the UK. And a [charcoal-activated vegan croissant](#) — made with sunflower margarine, flour, activated charcoal, sugar and lemon — made its doughy debut in London this week.



Gordon Ramsay ✓
@GordonRamsay



Going to give this [#vegan](#) thing a try ... Yes guys you heard that right. Gx

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Americans are also eating less beef than they were a decade ago. An estimated 12 percent of millennials say they are true vegetarians, according to a study by [The Hartman Group](#). What's more, US Beef consumption decreased 19 percent between 2005 and 2014, even as people also began consuming less pork, chicken, shellfish and whole milk, according to the latest [study by the Natural Resources Defense Council](#).

Celebrity chefs are supporting the meatless movement too. TV chef Gordon Ramsay tweeted Monday that he's "giving this #vegan thing a try...yes you guys heard that right," posting a photo of what appears to be a cauliflower crusted, cheese-less pie.

"It's about time restaurants start introducing better vegetarian options. Right now by moving in that direction, you're capturing a larger piece of the market," said Kaplan. "Vegetarians and vegans also don't have to feel ostracized when they go out to eat anymore."

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