

# Applegate rolls out 'blend burgers,' as plant-based food trend muscles into meat

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ANAHEIM, Calif. – Applegate Farms built a natural-meat empire on the belief that meat can be raised better.

Its latest products spring from the notion that meat can be eaten less.

The company, a subsidiary of Austin, Minn.-based Hormel Foods Corp., this week introduced “blend burgers” that reduce the amount of organic beef or turkey in a burger patty and fill it out with organic mushrooms. They are designed to appeal to people who are trying to put a little less meat and a few more vegetables in their diets.

“Our research shows more than 50 percent of consumers want to eat more plant-based foods, yet very few are behaving as vegetarians or vegans,” John Ghingo, president of Applegate, said in an interview Thursday. “They still love meat, they crave meat.”

The rise of plant-based alternatives to traditional meat and dairy products is one of the trends at Natural Products Expo West, one of the food industry’s largest trade shows. It has drawn 88,000 people, from natural and organic food producers and distributors to aficionados, to Los Angeles this week.

Applegate is one of dozens of food companies that rolled out new products at the event. Other companies showed pastas made from edamame, cheese puffs made from chickpeas and fermented hot pepper flakes with probiotics.

In joining the plant-based trend, Applegate and firms like it are paving a middle ground in the age-old divide between meat-eaters and vegetarians.

“Our pursuit is to find smarter ways to create animal-derived products,” Ghingo said. “If plants are a part of that, then we are going to do that.”

He noted that one way for the firm to stand out is by touting the simplicity of its blend burgers. They have just three ingredients: either organic beef or organic turkey, organic mushrooms and organic rosemary. “If you look at a lot of other meat-alternative burgers, the ingredient list is a mile long,” Ghingo said.

About 54 percent of U.S. consumers want to incorporate more plant-based foods into their diet, according to 2017 research from the Hartman Group, with the numbers being even higher among baby boomers.

“The whole world isn’t going to become vegan,” John Haugen, leader of 301 Inc., the venture-capital arm of General Mills, said as he toured the show.

But plant-based alternatives are growing fast, and the most promising ideas are those that could be an easy substitute for an already popular product, such as yogurt, milk or burgers. 301 has invested in a number of emerging brands exhibiting at Expo West, including Kite Hill, a dairy-free yogurt and cream-cheese company that replaces cow’s milk with almond milk.

Plant-based yogurt still represents just 3 to 4 percent of the market, but it is far outpacing traditional yogurt’s growth. In 2017, according to Nielsen research commissioned by the Plant Based Foods Association, plant-based yogurt grew 55 percent.

“The category within yogurt is still evolving,” said Rob Leibowitz, chief executive of Kite Hill, from his showroom booth. “You used to have to sacrifice taste to eat plant-based, but that’s not necessarily the case anymore.”

The sudden resignation of U.S. Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Scott Gottlieb this week cast uncertainty over some the event’s policy discussions, including efforts at the federal and state level to ban plant-based alternatives from using terms such as “milk” and “meat” to describe their products.

“Inevitably, this may slow down a decision,” said Michele Simon, executive director of the Plant Based Foods Association, during a session on the industry Thursday. “We actually don’t think the FDA is going to do anything [in restricting our labels] because of the First Amendment, which we believe is on our side.”

