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# ATTRACTING THE LUCRATIVE VEGETARIAN CONSUMER

**Items aimed at vegetarians are on the rise**

BY KEITH LORIA

A recent report by Mintel revealed that 31 percent of Americans are now practicing “meat free” days, so a deli offering extensive and delicious vegetarian options in-store can position the department as trendy and in touch with consumers’ dietary concerns.

Sharon Olson, executive director of Culinary Visions Panel, a division of Olson Communications based in Chicago, IL, says the rise in vegetarian items in the deli is very much a part of the veg-centric movement.

“Veg-centric items are not necessarily vegetarian, but appeal to the majority of consumers who are interested in adding more vegetables to their diets without eliminating meat protein all together,” she says. “Colorful and flavorful veg-centric dishes may be vegetarian, but often they include meat, as well. We consider this the age of the omnivore, with consumers interested in eating many different things.”

Delis that offer vegetarian/vegan items are great places for plant-based diet newbies to explore a wider range of choices than what they feel confident to initially make at home.

“Foods such as quinoa, farro and other whole grains as well as edamame and kale may be unfamiliar to those just starting to experiment with plant-based diets, and there’s a large measure of comfort in finding them ready to go in tasty and colorful take-out options,” says Georgia Orcutt, program director for the Oldways Vegetarian Network, a Boston-based nonprofit food and nutrition education organization.

It’s important for store managers to consider that people who seek vegetarian items at delis might not consider themselves vegetarian but are looking to go meatless one or two days a week. Also, people will shop at the deli to buy vegetarian foods for friends or house guests.







Patty Amato, senior vice president of Farm Ridge Foods, headquartered in Islandia, NY, notes that while vegetarian eating seems like an inconvenience to many people, it's important that healthy, convenient meals are readily available in supermarket delis.

Maeve Webster, president of Menu Matter, based in Arlington, VT, agrees that vegetarian items are becoming more prevalent, but thinks that to keep them relevant to a broader array of consumers, these foods shouldn't necessarily be pushed specifically as vegetarian.

"Given the ongoing focus on produce-forward items, these dishes are enjoying the same level of innovative care on the operator side and broader interest on the consumer side," she says. "Frankly, the vegetarian-ness of the dish should be simply one factor of the fact that it doesn't include meat, rather than the primary innovation objective. Additionally, deli operators should not create these items as some type of somewhat disappointing substitute for a meat dish, but rather a celebration of the ingredients in their own right."

### The Healthy Way

Orcutt notes today's supermarket delis understand the need to be relevant to all of their shoppers, especially in terms of health and wellness, and this includes the

ever growing trend toward plant foods and meatless meals.

"Emerging science continues to show how a plant-based diet can prevent and even reverse the progression of coronary heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and other chronic conditions," she says. "Eating more plant foods promotes human health and also contributes to the health of the planet."

Mark Miller, vice president of marketing at Simply Fresh Foods, based in Buena Park, CA, sees a lot more people watching their diets and looking for plant-based proteins in place of meat.

"We do some stuff with chickpea salads with other beans mixed in, and the hummus world has exploded," he says. "We've had success with black bean dip also, which is fairly new to our lineup, but something that can be sold in the refrigerated section of the deli."

The Better Bean Co., based in Wilsonville, OR, is the first bean company with products sold in the deli sections of local grocers like Whole Foods and Fresh Market, and co-founder Hannah Kullberg believes that [vegetarianism] is a trend that will be on the rise.

"People are becoming very aware about the impact of industrial meat on their bodies and the environment, and Better Bean has been on a mission to change the

way Americans eat beans," she says. "We make a line of chilled, ready-to-eat beans that taste so good, they inspire even the bean wary to fall in love with them."

The Better Bean Co. products are vegan, gluten-free, Non-GMO Verified and with half the sodium of canned beans.

"I would encourage any supermarket deli to offer lots of plant-based options without dairy, eggs or gluten," says Kullberg. "This offering will cater to vegetarians as well as special diet eaters. Vegetarians want to eat high-quality whole foods, too."

### Demographics Play a Role

Shoppers represent widespread cultural diversity, which tends to be greater in urban areas, but some of the smaller retailers are committed to offering vegetarian take-out items, says Orcutt.

"One thing to consider is the way options for the supermarket deli's party platters are changing," she says. "For example, Fareway, with 117 stores in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, and South Dakota, offers fruit and vegetable kabobs, along with the more traditional meat and cheese platters."

Miller believes that the vegetarian movement is more big city urban than the middle of the country, but sees it slowly catching on around the country.



Though younger consumers tend to have a significantly greater interest in vegetarian specifically and produce-forward generally, Webster says there is a growing interest among Gen X and Baby Boomers as well as across other demographics, including age and income level.

"It's becoming wider spread, but I think urban consumers, which do tend to be younger so that fits with the other demographic skews we see, tend to be more focused on vegetarian and produce-forward dishes," she says.

### Marketing to Vegetarians

Nationwide, vegans make up less than 5 percent of the population, and while in some areas they will certainly account for a larger share, most deli operators will have very few vegan customers.

"Deli operators should note that when an item is identified as vegan, it may appeal to a niche group of consumers, but it will immediately turn off another, typically larger, group," says Webster.

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## Savvy supermarkets are highlighting the presence of a chef in their deli departments and calling attention to plant-based foods on their websites.

Supermarket dietitian programs differ widely from retailer to retailer, but in some cases the dietitians plan promotions with the deli department and increase their visibility as agents of health and wellness in the deli signage.

"In many cases, local farmers and food producers can be highlighted to appeal to consumers who are becoming increasingly more mindful of everyone involved in bringing food to their tables," says Olson. "In a recent Culinary Visions Panel survey, 63 percent of consumers said they love talking to vendors who are passionate about the food they sell."

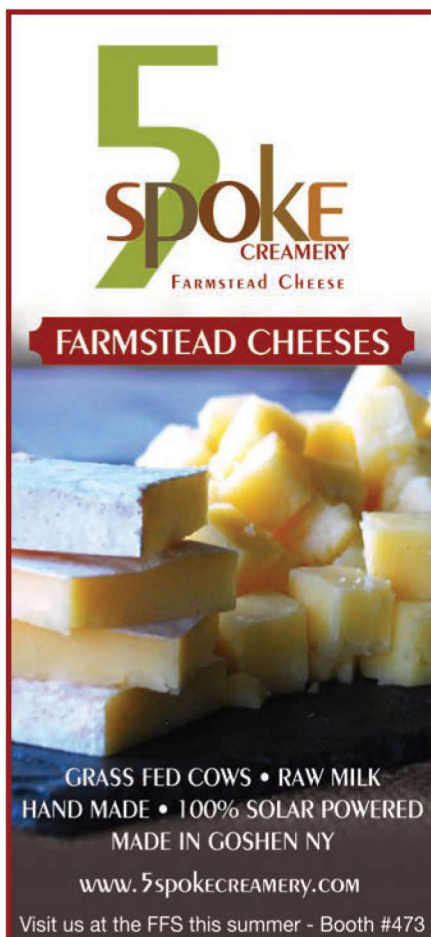
Delis can become a destination by offer-

ing a wide range of tasteful, flavorful foods that appeal to vegetarians and mainstream consumers who want to enjoy more vegetables. And, of course, there are a myriad of opportunities to cross merchandise with the produce department.

Innovative deli managers can also could work with brands to partner on promotions for Meatless Mondays or annual events tied to plant protein or vegetarians.

Premium vegetarian- and vegan-friendly products can create a sense of excitement for regular customers who are looking to reduce their environmental footprint or cut down on their red meat consumption.

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