

Plant-based becoming a 'pillar of food infrastructure'

KANSAS CITY — Not long ago, frequent dietary advice was to eat more fruits and vegetables. Choosing whole grains then became important. Now the two have partnered with legumes, nuts and seeds to bring plant-based foods to the center of the plate.

Plant-derived foods and ingredients are being converted into culinary creations designed to alleviate hunger, provide nutrition and satisfy. They are increasingly being served not because there is a booming vegan or vegetarian movement, but simply because people are choosing non-meat entrées as they heed the recommendations of nutritionists, environmentalists and animal activists who encourage going meat-free a few times per week.

"We are entering a completely new phase of innovation in foods and beverages," said Julie Mann, global plant protein program manager for Ingredion Inc.. "This is truly a paradigm shift. Plant based is becoming a pillar of food infrastructure. The changes we are making today may influence the future well-being of the people as well as our planet."

The less is more lifestyle

Flexitarian, "lessitarian," or "reducetarian" ... whatever the term, several consumers are making efforts to eat less meat. Many vegetable-centric prepared foods, however, rely on animal products, such as butter, cheese, eggs, honey and yogurt, for flavor, functionality and nutrition.

"The addition of dairy-based items as well as eggs to plant-based foods can add richness and depth of flavor," said Aspen Burkhardt, culinary council member, of LifeSpice. "An ingredient may also provide some functionality, such as emulsification, leavening and probiotics (from yogurt)."

When making a dish such as cauliflower fried rice, Ms. Burkhardt suggested adding extra vegetables and including the traditional scrambled egg to add protein. With a vegetable wrap or falafel, yogurt sauce adds a desirable acidic/sour note.

Crispy black bean tacos "Maybe it is a little browned butter with herbs over vegetables, such as butternut squash, carrots and parsnips," Ms. Burkhardt said. "Maybe a sprinkle of cotija cheese on mushroom and squash tacos."

Whatever it is, it's a small percent of the total dish. The consumer still looks at the food as being a plant-based meal.

"Instead of thinking in terms of nutritional requirements or a diet, which people view as rigid, today's consumers prefer to think in terms of lifestyle choices," said Shayna Snyder, account director for Culinary Visions.

For many, this means more plant-based foods, namely fruits and vegetables, prepared using traditional meat preparations and cooking techniques. This often involves the use of bold flavors to give the ingredients bigger sensory appeal.

"The term flexitarian in no way indicates a vegan status," said Judson McLester, executive chef and ingredient sales manager for McIlhenny Company/Tabasco Brand Products. "The nature of the term 'flex' is utilized here to denote that this group of people is not easily defined and prefers to consume both meat and plant depending on their mood, social setting and impulse desire.

"A key trend to note here is the changing palate of the everyday consumer," Mr. McLester said. "Complex, spicy flavors are no longer the exception, but the rule for the majority."

Eighty-seven per cent of 1,500 surveyed consumers said they want to add more vegetables into their diet, according to the 2018 Mindful Dining Study from Culinary Visions. Still, 82% of consumers surveyed said they love meat.

"Consumers are flexible on how they integrate more plant-based foods into their routine and may choose to eat plant-based one day a week or one meal a day, depending on their goals and ideals," Ms. Snyder said. "The key to this is the freedom to continue eating animal-based foods."