

Understanding the Modern Vegetarian Customer

Plant-based diners comprise a small part of the population, but their dietary habits shed light on much broader trends.

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Long before keto and paleo, flexitarian and pescatarian, grain-less and gluten-free, there was the original alternative diet: vegetarian. If you had any doubt that plant-forward dining was on the upswing, check out our special report.

While such dining behaviors are becoming more common, vegetarians remain a niche and somewhat static slice of population. That being said, understanding—and serving—these herbivorous consumers can pave the way to mass appeal and even menu innovation.

Who are they?

At the most basic level, vegetarians are people who forgo meats. Within that catchall are different shades: A vegetarian may consume animal-derived products like eggs and cheese, while a vegan refrains from any food originating from animals—including honey. At their healthiest, vegetarians and vegans eat diets rich in vegetables, fruits, beans and other legumes, and whole grains.

As with any diet, some members eschew the nutritious, whole foods in favor of processed items. Vegan evangelist and author Kris Carr coined the term “muffin vegan” to describe the pallid, malnourished eaters subsisting entirely on packaged veggie burgers and other processed foods.

Counterintuitive crowd

It's tempting to assume vegetarians, and especially vegans, skew female, white, and urban-dwelling, given public figures like Carr, Ellen DeGeneres, and Miley Cyrus, but the numbers paint a very different picture. According to Datassential, a greater portion of men (2 percent) are vegan compared to 1 percent of women. Three percent of both genders as well as white, black, and Hispanic consumers are vegetarians, while a sizable 7 percent of Asians are vegetarian. Interestingly the more restrictive vegan diet appeals most to minorities: 3 percent of Hispanic and Asian-Americans are vegan; 2 percent of African-Americans are; and only 1 percent of white consumers are.

In terms of age, millennials are more likely to be either vegetarian (5 percent) or vegan (4 percent) than any other generation. [A fun side note: Of the 3,500 people polled in Datassential's study, 0 percent of boomers were vegan.]

As for geography, the South—land of barbecue, fried chicken, and other meaty delights—boasts a larger vegan population than the West, although that relationship flips for vegetarianism. Unsurprisingly, urban areas are home to more vegetarians than the suburbs or rural areas. Cities tie with the suburbs for their population of vegans, both at 3 percent.

Holding steady

In the U.S., more consumers are clamoring for veg-only options—an estimated 54 percent, per the Hartman Group. Intuitively, this would suggest that vegetarians and vegans are growing in their ranks, but it's simply not the case.

According to a recent Gallup poll, 5 percent of Americans identified themselves as vegetarian, while 3 percent reported they were vegan in 2018. The former percentage has remained constant since 2012, and the latter has only increased by 1 percentage point. **Similarly, Culinary Visions found that 87 percent of consumers would like to eat more vegetables—but 82 percent of polled participants reported that they loved meat.**

In short, the number of consumers refraining from animal products may not be skyrocketing, but the demand for veggies is.

Winning them—and their meat-eating friends

Be intentional with vegan/vegetarian options. This should go without saying, but fries, skimpy side salads, and bread baskets do not a meal make—same goes for a bun filled with lettuce and tomato. By adding a few signature veggie entrées, restaurants can not only eliminate the veto vote, but also attract greater market share overall.

Go global. From India and Ethiopia to Singapore and Peru, the world is your playground for culinary inspiration. Most cultures have signature vegetarian dishes or recipes that can be easily adapted to eliminate prohibited ingredients. Similarly, ingredients and spices often reserved for animal-based foods have infinite potential in plant-forward applications.

Research, research, research. Remember when quinoa, a complete-protein seed that acts like a grain, was nonexistent in the U.S.? Yeah, neither do we. The last decade has carried so many foods from relative obscurity to menu headliner. Restaurants that wish to not just ride the veggie wave, but rather get ahead of it, would do well to familiarize themselves with up-and-coming ingredients like pili, coconut amino acids, jackfruit, and Irish moss.