



Future Proof Your Menu:

A Plant-Based Toolkit for Restaurants

June 2024

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Commissioned for the Vancouver Humane Society



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Why Plant-based?

Many restaurant goers love dishes like pasta Bolognese, a burger with fries, or a cheese plate to share with friends. However, many Canadian consumers are becoming increasingly aware that excessive consumption of animal ingredients in our diets can have an impact on our health¹ and the environment². That's why consumers are looking for equally tasty and satisfying alternatives, and restaurants are transitioning to cater to them.



65% of adults in the Lower Mainland have reduced their meat and dairy consumption.³

Thanks to new, exciting products and cooking techniques that elevate the dining experience, choosing plant-based has become **more accessible** and **tastier**.

Diversifying your menu with plant-based options **is a smart move** for restaurants looking to thrive in today's market while also promoting health and sustainability.

We've developed this toolkit to provide **a clear roadmap for introducing and promoting plant-based dishes**. It includes dos and don'ts, practical tips, and tangible examples that you can implement gradually or all at once.

Restaurants and other food service organizations are also introducing more plant-based options because doing so provides **significant economic benefits**:

- By staying updated with the evolving culinary landscape, restaurants can stand out from the competition and **secure additional revenue** during these inflationary times.
- Plant-based ingredients are **often more affordable** than meat and dairy and have a **longer shelf life**. Research shows that transitioning to plant-based menus can increase revenues and significantly reduce food costs⁴.
- More revenue by attracting a **wider audience**:
 - Draw in health-conscious and environmentally aware consumers. Become more inclusive through plant-based dishes. Diners with specific dietary wishes often influence dining decisions. By adding plant-based options, your business can attract bigger customer groups. Think of different dietary wishes coming from:
 - allergies (with an increasing number of people being lactose intolerant)⁵
 - religious and cultural dietary needs,
 - preferences of Millennials (over half identify as flexitarian) and Gen Zers⁶
 - (60% want to eat more plant-based)

Marketing is everything

Know your audience: cater to your crowd.

Your first step towards success lies in understanding your audience—both existing and prospective. Are you passionate about serving health-conscious diners? Or are you catering to those looking for creative and trendy dining experiences?



Spoiler alert: People dining out crave tasty, delicious, and mouthwatering meals. Focusing on articulating the irresistible flavors that define your culinary creations will win over the hearts of your crowd.



Nitty-gritty communication.

Communicating about unique ingredients, intricate flavour profiles, and innovative cooking methods are the secret ingredients that draw diners in. These are the rules of culinary seduction.

1) Dish naming: Get creative or get eaten

Do you also find 'Oven-baked Pumpkin Lasagna with Spicy Grilled Mushrooms topped with a Creamy Bechamel' much more appealing than 'Veg Lasagna' or 'Meat-free Lasagna'?

- The way you name and/or label your culinary creations wields immense influence over diners' choices.

DON'T



Don't use labels like 'meat-free', 'vegetarian', 'vegan'

- These labels alienate potential consumers, they evoke feelings of loss,⁸ or can make omnivores feel it is not for them.



Don't use knowledge-based appeals regarding health or environmental benefits to convince customers

- Trying to convince customers on this basis may have the reverse effect.⁹

Don't use boring descriptions that leave out the food's look and feel

- This has the risk of leaving people uninspired by your dish.

DO



Do use labels like (v), (ve), (vo)

- Opt for subtler cues denoting plant-based dishes, coupled with clear allergen information. Ensure there is something at the bottom of the menu that describes what these mean (i.e., make sure vegan and vegetarian are differentiated).
- Instead of focusing on what is absent in a dish, **do emphasize the ingredients present in your dish.**

Do spotlight taste and flavour, which is most effective for boosting sales

- Craft names and menu descriptions that tantalize the senses, painting each dish's aroma, texture, and taste.¹⁰

Do emphasize a food's look and feel

- Research¹¹ shows that a dish's appearance and mouth-feel¹² can dramatically affect diners' preferences.

2) The sensory symphony: Taste, flavour, look, mouth-feel

How to emphasize a food's taste, look and feel:

- ✓ **Highlight unique ingredients and their flavour profiles**, to help the customer imagine what the dish will taste like.
- ✓ **Add cooking techniques** in the description to help the customer imagine the dish better: think 'slow roasted', 'smoked', 'oven-baked', etc.
- ✓ **Use indulgent terms** like 'creamy', 'warming', 'crunchy', 'smooth' and 'sticky'.
- ✓ **Highlight freshness and quality** of ingredients.
- ✓ **Emphasize colour and mouthfeel:**
 - Colour¹³ has been shown as the single biggest cue for people to anticipate the taste of a dish.¹⁴
 - ➔ Rainbow Salad creates an expectation of a fresh, flavor-packed, and visually vibrant dish.
 - Mouthfeel intensifies the anticipation of each bite. Emphasize texture and body.
 - ➔ Melty, creamy, velvety, syrupy, silky, powdery, grainy, sticky, thick, juicy, coating, full, crunchy, etc.

An experiment¹⁵ showed that simply renaming "Gnocchi with mushroom, fresh spinach and parmesan sauce"

to

"Melt in the mouth gnocchi with mushroom, fresh spinach and creamy parmesan sauce" resulted in a **14 percent increase** in consumer-stated likelihood of ordering the dish."



3) Chasing the kale-eating tree-huggers?

If your target audience is health and sustainability-focused, you can explore alternative positive strategies tailored to them.

- For health-conscious diners:
 - ✓ Use descriptors such as gut-friendly, hearth-healthy, nutrient-rich.
 - ✓ Highlight 'fresh', 'seasonal', etc.
 - ✓ **AVOID** using restrictive language, such as low-fat (many people will see this food as less enjoyable).
- For environmentally conscious diners:
 - ✓ Emphasize the origins of your ingredients to pique interest, such as:
 - The natural environment in which ingredients are grown; or;
 - Locally sourced produce.
 - For example, 'Field-Grown Breakfast' or 'Locally Produced Delights.'¹⁶
 - ✓ Spotlight Canadian-sourced ingredients, such as in the 'Canadian Black Bean Taco'.

See next page for dish naming examples!



Figure 1: Nitty-gritty dish naming


Magic menu.



Beyond the dish names, factors like menu placement, menu board layout, and website presentation play pivotal roles in enticing customers.

1) Strategic placement on the menu

Research shows that cleverly placing menu items within the main menu makes customers more likely to choose your plant-based dish.¹⁷

- ✓ **Mix plant-based dishes** in the rest of the main menu.
- ✓ Subtly indicate that some dishes are plant-based by using the leaf symbol, (V), or (VO): 
- ✓ Dishes at the beginning or end of a menu are more likely to be ordered:¹⁸ an invitation to experiment!
- ✓ When you prefer a separate section for those seeking dishes with dietary requests, do so in addition to mixing them in the main menu.
- ✓ Promote plant-based dishes as **chef suggestions** (in the main menu, and on a separate flyer in a test phase).

EXAMPLE MENU:

Risotta primavera (v) 
Peas, mushrooms, lemon

Lobster & crab roll
Avocado, lettuce, lemon mayonnaise

Sauteed King Prawns
Chili, garlic, parsley basmati rice

Deep fried haddock
Minted peas, chips, sauce tartar

Chicken cacciatore
Roasted chicken breast, mushrooms, olives

Steak frites
morrells, chips, belanaise sauce

Ricotta & spinach ravioli (v) 
Asparagus, butter, sage sauce

Figure 2: Mixing the menu

2) Ensure visual appeal

- ✓ Attract customers with eye-catching images of stunning plant-based dishes.
- ✓ Use vibrant colors and creative plating techniques across your website, social media platforms, and menu boards.
- ✓ Put effort into making an eye-catching menu design.

Mastering your online presence.

Everyone knows the importance of social media these days, but how can you use it wisely to promote your plant-based options? By spotlighting your plant-based dishes with a visually attractive picture and an enticing description or setting up targeted marketing campaigns on social media.

- Get Social:
 - ✓ Share why your plant-based food is delicious on social media.
 - Create ads that target your desired audience.
 - Incorporate storytelling: share the inspiration behind each dish or describe the culinary journey of sourcing and preparing it.

- ✓ Join in on events like [Planted Expo](#) or campaigns like [Veganuary](#) to promote your plant-based dishes. promote your plant-based dishes.
- Team Up: Building good relationships helps you offer a variety of tasty plant-based choices.
- ✓ Work with local groups that support plant-based eating to promote your restaurant.
- ✓ Collaborate with local businesses and brands to create special dishes and generate buzz around a new dish.
- ✓ Promote your plant-based dishes by offering discounts through platforms such as [plant curious](#).
- Fun Events:
 - ✓ Host a plant-based cooking class or event.
 - ✓ Organizing a plant-based tasting experience at an affordable price: tasting matters! This ensures a low cost for your customers to try something new, which will help them try it out. Later, they are more likely to order this meal at the normal price again!

! Ensure any campaigns follow the dos and don'ts of communicating about plant-based dishes !





Menu Development & Presentation

You know how to name and promote your dishes, but what about developing new menu items?

New trend! Plant-based by default.

A new trend that is making plant-based food more available on menus is creating plant-based items by default. **There are different ways to default:**

- ✓ Create a plant-based base for some of your dishes and offer diners the choice of meat/dairy additions.
- ✓ Make a menu of the month plant-based and note that meat-based specials are available on request.

See how, in both cases, the menu starts from a plant-based basis? This makes it easier for people to choose plant-based meals, as opposed to the opposite, where they need to know how to modify options to make them plant-based.¹⁹ The result: sales of plant-based dishes go up drastically.

A field experiment in a Danish restaurant examined the change in diner choice when a “Menu of the Month” featured a meat-based special with a note that a plant-based special was available on request versus when the special was plant-based and noted that a meat-based special was available upon request.

Findings: Among customers who ordered from the “Menu of the Month,” **80% chose the plant-based special as the default**, whereas only 8.6% ordered plant-based when a meat-based special was the default.²⁰

HOW TO START DEFAULTING PLANT-BASED?

- 1) Examine where subtle substitutions can be made, such as defaulting to plant-based cheese, bread, desserts, and mayonnaise.

- 2) Create dishes such as salads, curries, bowls, etc., which are plant-based by default.
- 3) Think of additions, such as protein, that customers can order in addition to the plant-based default dish. Include here also plant-based products such as tofu, tempeh, falafel, plant-based chicken pieces, plant-based grated cheese, etc.

Tasty and affordable.

When developing your menu make sure the dish is also attractive for the customers' wallet.

- ✓ Show that plant-based doesn't mean it has to be expensive.
- ✓ Don't be overly generous because a price that is too low might suggest that the dish or products used are of a lesser quality.

Pro-tips for plant-based plate perfection.

When thinking about a new dish, it is important to think about diners' experience²¹:

- 1) **Seasoning** is essential for ensuring satisfactory eating experiences for diners.
 - ✓ **Marinate and season:** Use sauces, liquid smoke, and bold seasonings to enhance the flavour of vegetables and protein ingredients, such as seitan, tofu, and tempeh in your dishes.
 - ✓ **Versatile dressings:** Incorporate dressings like oil, vinegar, vegan mayo, soy sauce, coconut cream, and tahini.

- ✓ **Use salt:** Don't forget the importance of salt in enhancing flavours.

- 2) Add **crunch and texture** to your dish to take the experience of the diner to the next level:

- ✓ **Introduce crunch:** Use breadcrumbs, croutons, nuts, seeds, raisins, cranberries, crumbled tortilla chips, furikake, gomasio, dukkah, and other crunchy elements.

- ✓ Use **cooking techniques** such as baking, grilling, browning, smoking.

- ✓ **Add fresh herbs** to enhance flavor, texture, and presentation.

- 3) To deepen flavour, add **umami ingredients** like walnuts, dried tomatoes, dried mushrooms (shiitakes), nutritional yeast, soy sauce, miso paste, algae, seaweed, vegetable stock, peas, garlic, and olives.

- 4) **Colourful and visually appealing ingredients** make dishes more enticing. Using fresh herbs, vibrant vegetables, and fruits, combined with creative plating, makes the experience fun and stand out.



Trending: Mushrooms

Customers value them highly and expect a satisfying umami flavor from them. When mentioning them on your menu, use their full names and the cooking method. For example: Perfectly Grilled Portobello mushroom, or Crispy-Bottomed Oyster Mushroom Steak.



Putting it all together.

Go **step by step**. Don't try to do everything once, but start with one main dish, a side dish, or a dessert and go from there.

- ✓ Consider starting out by adapting your customers' favourite dish to be plant-based.
- ✓ For that dish, focus on taste, experience, colours, crunch, seasoning, naming, and placement on the menu.

Easy swaps

Here are some swaps and techniques that don't require significant changes in preparation methods.

The basics.

Introducing these swaps is a breeze. They require minimal adjustment – just a slight change in your ingredient lineup while maintaining the integrity of your recipes and kitchen routines.

- ✓ Consider swapping out traditional ingredients like milk, butter, bouillon, and mayonnaise for their plant-based counterparts.
 - Doing so, you might already have plant-based soup of the day by default, or you can offer those grilled vegetables as a plant-based side dish.
 - For example:
 - Use plant-based milk from Silk, or a similar product
 - Swap butter for oils or plant-based butter from Earth Balance, or similar product
 - Use the plant-based mayonnaise of Hellman's, or similar product to use for dressings or on sandwiches
- ✓ Rethink your dressings by using oil, vinegar, plant-based mayo, soy sauce, coconut cream, or tahini²² to make them plant-based while also adding layers of flavour and texture to salads and marinades (for vegetables or protein sources such as tempeh and tofu).
- ✓ Many varieties of dried pasta are inherently plant-based (without eggs), making them an excellent choice for culinary creations.

Meat mimics.

Offering plant-based options that are familiar and approachable, such as a burger or pasta dish, can make it easier for diners to try these options for the first time.

How do you choose the best mimic?

- ✓ When adapting traditional recipes, aim for mock versions that **closely resemble** the originals. This ensures that your customers are delighted with the familiar taste and experience.
- ✓ Prioritize options that closely **mimic its flavour and texture**. Diners crave dishes that are not only delicious but also satisfying.
- ✓ For ease and convenience, opt for products readily available from suppliers. This streamlines your kitchen operations, helps manage costs, and keeps your menu prices competitive.
 - Swap out ground beef with plant-based ground mock-meat to mimic a traditional spaghetti Bolognese, chili, or shepherd's pie. Use for example *Beyond Beef*, or a similar product.
 - Consider readily marinated seitan 'steak' strip to make a mouthwatering breakfast burrito. Use for example *Gusta Seitan Burger* to strip, or a similar product.
 - Substitute traditional pork sausage with plant-based sausages in breakfast sandwiches, brunch platters, or hearty breakfast bowls. Use for example the *veggie links from Big Mountain Food*, or a similar product.

Traditional plant-based protein products.

If you feel more adventurous, tofu, tempeh and seitan offer many possibilities for dishes in your kitchen.

- ✓ They are full of protein.
- ✓ They are a great product to add a variety of flavours to.

→ You can marinate and season them well as they are like sponges, retaining the flavour of marinades, and grilling them accentuates that again.

Swaps using products like tofu, tempeh, and soy chunks:



Tofu Stir-Fry: Cube tofu and stir-fry it with colorful vegetables, garlic, ginger, and your favourite sauce for a quick and nutritious meal served over rice or noodles.



Tempeh Bacon BLT: Marinate tempeh slices in a smoky and savoury marinade, then pan-fry or bake until crispy and use them as a plant-based alternative to bacon in BLT sandwiches or salads.



Tempeh Caesar Salad: Marinate tempeh strips in a zesty Caesar dressing, then grill or bake until crispy and serve them on a bed of romaine lettuce with vegan Caesar dressing, croutons, and vegan parmesan cheese for a flavorful and protein-packed salad.



Tofu Pad-Thai: Cube tofu and stir-fry it with rice noodles, vegetables, tofu, and a tangy and savoury Pad Thai sauce made with tamarind, soy sauce, and lime for a delicious and satisfying meal.

Beans & legumes.

Beans are wildly underrated! And this is why they are awesome to use in the kitchen:

- ✓ Beans are affordable, versatile, and easy to work with;
- ✓ Are highly nutritious and leave customers feeling satisfied²³;
- ✓ Come in many varieties, many of which are produced here in Canada;
- ✓ Can be found frozen, in containers, or in ready-to-use mixes with grains and vegetables, perfect for dishes like chili or curry.

Think of:



1. Black Bean Burgers: Hearty and flavourful black bean burgers seasoned with spices and herbs, perfect for grilling and serving on a bun with all the fixings.



2. Chickpea Curry: Whip up a fragrant and comforting chickpea curry with aromatic spices, coconut milk, and vegetables, served over rice or with warm naan bread.



3. Lentil Shepherd's Pie: Prepare a comforting shepherd pie with a savoury lentil and vegetable filling topped with creamy mashed potatoes, baked until golden and bubbly.



4. Mushroom and Lentil Bolognese: Simmer a rich and savoury mushroom and lentil Bolognese sauce with tomatoes, onions, garlic, and herbs, served over pasta for a comforting and satisfying dish.

Plant-based cheeses.

Plant-based cheeses are constantly improving. Using them makes your restaurant more inclusive and appealing to a broader range of customers, including those who are lactose intolerant or have dietary restrictions.

- ✓ They are often made from coconut oil, combined with cashews, almonds, or other nuts, along with water and starch.
- ✓ They come in delicious and versatile cheese options to enhance many dishes, such as:
 - **Spreads**, such as *Spread'em*, or a similar product.
 - **Grated cheese**, such as mozzarella or cheddar style from *Daiya* or similar product.
 - **Firm cheeses**, such as *Daiya Gouda Block* or a similar product.
 - (cashew) **Cultured wheels**, such as those from *UmYum Monroe Camembert*, or a similar product.
 - **Feta-style cheese**, such as *Violife's Just Like Feta Block*, or a similar product.
 - **Parmesan-style cheese**, such as *Violife's Just Like Parmesan Wedge* or similar product.

- **Cheese curds for poutine**, such as *Nafsika's Garden* or a similar products.
- **Meltable cheese slices** for toast or burgers, such as *Tofutti's all-American Cheese Slices* or a similar product.

Eggs.

More and more *egg-citing* products are entering the market. Next to making omelets from tofu or chickpea flour, you can also find egg mimics in the store, such as omelets, boiled eggs, and poached eggs that are enjoyable and closely resemble eggs and are ready to use. These products can also be made from scratch if you want to be adventurous!

- Use *Just Egg* (made from mung beans), or similar product, for omelets or other breakfast dishes, or similar product.
- Use *Yo Egg's boiled egg*, or similar product, to add to sandwiches or salads.
- Use *Yo Egg's Sunny-Side-Up egg*, or similar product, place it between a burger, or pizza or on toast.
- Use *Yo Egg's Poached egg*, or similar product, to prepare eggs benedict, add it to a ramen bowl, roast avocado, or cooked asparagus.

Where to find these new ingredients

Whether you are looking for traditional plant-based proteins, meat mimics, bean mixes, or plant-based butter and milk, start by asking your current supplier if they can provide these options.

If your current supplier doesn't have what you need, consider exploring Vancouver-based suppliers who specialize in plant-based products:

- **Happy Veggie World**: Great for mock meats.
- **Vegan Supply Wholesale**: Offers a wide range of basic and specialty plant-based products.
- **Vegan Foods Wholesale**: Provides plant-based bouillons, meats, seafood, and desserts.
- **Local Producers**: collaborate with local brands like **Daiya Food**, **Big Mountain Food**, **Kula Foods**, **Soul Bite**, **Living Tree Foods**, **UMYum**, **Brightside foods**, or similar brands, for quality plant-based offerings.

We're here to support you

Are you unsure how to start or do you want menu development advice?

- ✔ We can provide any support needed to make a shift. Contact us at programs@vancouverhumanesociety.bc.ca or 604-416-2902.
- ✔ We offer a [plant-based recipe library](#) with scalable volumes.

- ✔ We can help adapt or develop new recipes.
- ✔ We also provide hands-on culinary training for restaurants and chefs, tailored to your current needs, to help you add more plant-based options to menus.

Implementing plant-based foods in your restaurant will be a game-changer. By leveraging these creative marketing strategies, thoughtfully developing your menu, and making easy ingredient swaps, you can attract a broader audience and meet the growing demand for sustainable, health-conscious dining options. Embrace this toolkit to stay ahead of the curve and positively impact your business and the planet!



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