



Plant-based Food on the Rise.

How Menu Changes Can Help Reduce your Carbon Footprint.

Customers are demanding healthier and more sustainable menus, as a result many restaurants are responding with more plant-rich menus and locally grown, organic ingredients. But it isn't as easy as adding a couple of vegetarian dishes.

Sustainability is an incredibly wide-ranging topic. From waste management to reducing plastic use and energy consumption, there are countless ways hotels can work to reduce their impact on our planet. One approach more operators are taking is to shift the balance of meat and veggies on their menus. The U.S. National Restaurant Association ranked plant based proteins and healthy bowls in their top 10 restaurant trends for 2020. According to Technomic's 2018 Healthy Eating Consumer Trend Report, 40% of consumers say their definitions of health have changed over the past two years. Increased participation in specialized diets, as well as a desire for more sustainable products, has many consumers looking for plant-based options—both when they're at home and when they're traveling. Eating less meat or no meat at all is gaining in popularity and it's no wonder why—it's healthy, compassionate and reduces one's impact on the planet.

Last year Hilton introduced the world's first 'vegan suite' at their London Bankside location. Their vegan-friendly hotel stay is now offering everything from a plant-based keycard, to eco-stationery and carpet. The culinary team at Hilton London Bankside has redesigned the in-room menu accordingly, which now includes various vegan breakfast options such as fruit juices, muesli, grilled Portobello mushroom, avocado and scrambled Quorn and quinoa. Vegan lunch and dinner offerings include cucumber salad, cauliflower steak and five-bean dhal.

Hyatt Regency London has also taken advantage of the veggie-hype. "Throughout 2019, we saw a huge increase in demand for plant-based food. We noticed that our vegan burger slowly began stealing sales from our original beef burgers. And the same with our artisan flatbread pizzas – we introduced vegan options to our artisan range and again, we saw diners were choosing the vegan options over the regular dishes," Nathaniel Farrell, The Laureate's executive chef, explains in an interview with the industry guide "The New Hotelier." "Feedback has been extremely positive and is ultimately reflected in the choices our guests are making," he adds.



It's all about context

With consumers demanding healthier and more environmentally friendly options, there's a clear business imperative to up the number of veggies on the menu. However, to have a meaningful impact on your carbon footprint, it isn't as easy as adding a couple of plant-based dishes or enforcing a Meat-Free Monday. For food sustainability expert Will Nicholson, who is working with the Food Climate Research Network and the Food Foundation to develop usable metrics for assessing food industry progress in delivering sustainable and healthy diets, it's all about context. Vegan-friendly hotels might represent for sure the best option for vegan travelers who can afford it. While a relatively extreme approach might work for a 'green hotel' focusing on vegan travellers, the majority of hotel operators have to provide a broader food concept to cater to the individual preferences of their guests. "I've had conversations with hotels, caterers and retailers recently where they've done some really great stuff, increasing the amount of plant-based foods they're using and reducing the amount of meat, which has had an evidence based impact on reducing their carbon footprint," he says. In these cases, it's likely to be much more effective to look at your food offer holistically and implement more subtle changes across the week.



"And don't just think about your restaurant – look at your room service options, snack area and even mini bars," Sascha Barby, senior director of Global Culinary Experts at RATIONAL points out. "It's equally important to keep it tasty. Back in the day, a 'good dish' consisted of meat and carbohydrates with some veg. So the key now is to transform a plant-based option into a full dish without the consumer missing anything." Barby continues, "If an operator just introduces sustainable options because it's good for the environment but it's not tasty, the initiative will die soon. But if the food is really good, trendy and tasteful, people will see the sustainability factor as an added benefit."

Small changes, big impact

Nicholson says it's also crucial to keep in mind that your environmental impact equals menu multiplied by sales, plus waste – so a small change on a dish you're going to use at high volume could be more impactful than a big change on a dish that isn't going to be very popular.

For example, a TexMex restaurant might offer beef, pork, chicken and mushroom burritos, with 95% of their sales coming from beef, pork and chicken. In this case, putting 25% less meat in the meat burritos could have a much greater impact than selling a few more vegetarian options. Similarly, a lunch buffet introducing a Meat-Free Monday could have the same – or a smaller – impact than using 20% less meat from Tuesday to Sunday. Plus, if the Meat-Free Monday concept is not effectively communicated to guests, the operation could risk over-producing and creating an unintended waste problem. Crucially, these sort of non-drastic menu changes not only have a big impact on a business's sustainability; they could also help to reduce food costs.

Marketing your menu

Communication is everything when it comes to actually getting customers to eat the most planet friendly items on the menu – at least if they are not vegetarians or vegans already. And according to the World Resources Institute's Better Buying Lab, which has been researching the kind of language that works to boost sales of plant-rich menu items for the past two years, the key is steering clear of terms like 'meat-free', 'vegan' and 'vegetarian' and 'low fat.' Instead, businesses are advised to highlight the products' provenance, spotlight their flavor, and emphasise their look and feel. Another technique, according to Barby, is to think about products that are already generating marketing hype. "Plant-based burgers are easy to promote because they're new to the market and as they mimic meat and manipulate your taste buds, they're thrilling to lots of people," he says.

However turning a hype into long term success takes more than a plant-based burger patty. "Creating an accomplished vegan menu is not a case of simply substituting ingredients," Farrell explains. "With plant-based foods, the tastes and textures need more elevation. This is mostly because meat products naturally contain fats or oils, which bring with them their own flavors to dishes." So successfully shifting your food options away from meat to more sustainable ingredients, is not only a challenge in terms of marketing but requires creativity and craftsmanship of a chef.

Sustainable cooking methods

Operators should also look for sustainability improvements in the way they cook their food. Thanks to steam preparation and faster cooking times, for example, RATIONAL appliances can reduce moisture loss from meat by up to 30%, compared to conventional cooking methods. Chefs then need



to purchase fewer raw ingredients, which in turn do not need to be produced, processed and transported. RATIONAL customers worldwide save around 400,000 tons of meat per year. This is just the tip of the iceberg. RATIONAL's sustainability report details many other ways the company is helping its clients operate more sustainably – from reduced energy use to healthier cooking methods.

Want to know more?

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