

Growth Potential for Soy in Hybrid Meats

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The movement toward plant-based diets suggests that soy consumption will grow, despite increasing competition, as will the number of new soy products entering the marketplace. In fact, within just the past several months, three companies, Impossible Foods, Nestle and ABP (UK) have introduced plant burgers containing soy protein. However, one way in which soy consumption may increase is infrequently discussed.

Discussions about plant-based diets often include mentions of the increasing numbers of vegetarians and vegans. However, data suggest that the prevalence of these two dietary patterns hasn't changed that much in recent years and remains relatively small. For example, a 2018 Gallop [poll](#) of 1,033 U.S. consumers found that the prevalence of self-described vegetarians is only about 5%, which is the same as it was in 2012 and down from the 6% recorded in 1999. Currently, about 3% of Americans identify as vegans, which is up from 2% in 2012. So, veganism has increased, although it still represents a very tiny minority of the population. Furthermore, the numbers of vegetarians and vegans may be inflated since surveys typically show that folks who classify themselves in this way often eat foods that disqualify them from their respective classifications.

The point of sharing the Gallop poll data is that greater soy consumption isn't going to be the result of increasing the number of consumers who completely shun meat. It will be because of the movement toward "flexitarian" eating, but perhaps not in the way one might think. commonly thought.

Flexitarian is a relative new term that has been emerged in the scientific and public sectors that was added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 2014.¹ Flexitarianism is a portmanteau of "flexible" and "vegetarian," referring to an individual who follows a

primarily (but not strictly) vegetarian diet, occasionally eating meat or fish. The defining element of flexitarian eating is the reduction in meat intake. But this can be accomplished by reducing the number of meals at which meat is consumed as well as by reducing the amount of meat consumed at any given meal.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a lot of discussion about the eating habits of Chinese, in part because of the attention The China Study received.² It was noted that Chinese consume very small amounts of meat and that they use it primarily as a condiment. That is, for the purpose of flavoring rather than as a main ingredient of a meal. So, rather than eating 4 ounces of meat (or a lot more) at a meal, which is considered a serving by U.S. standards, the Chinese might eat less than an ounce.

Americans may never acquiesce to consuming so little meat at one sitting. Nevertheless, there is the potential for soy protein to be combined with meat as a means of reducing meat intake while still maintaining the attributes of meat many consumers crave. According to Johannes [Tonauer](#), manager and board member of Moguntia Food Group, “Hybrid products fusing meat and non-meat proteins hold strong potential to cater to flexitarians looking to cut back on their meat consumption for both health and sustainability reasons.”

This hybrid approach might be the easiest way for many people to shift away from a meat-centric diet to a more plant-centered one. Recently, Gardner and colleagues³ recommended a 25% decrease in protein intake paired with a 25% shift from animal food to plant food protein intake—from an 85:15 ratio to a 60:40 ratio—as a means of decreasing carbon dioxide emissions and water use.

Soy protein is already widely added to meat as an extender, but also for functional purposes, such as increasing moisture retention.⁴ There is a long history of research on the use of soy protein in combination with meat.⁴ Given this background, and that the quality of soy protein is similar to the quality of meat protein, if hybrid meats do in fact take off, it would seem that soy protein is poised to benefit.⁵

References

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