

PLANT-POWERED SCHOOL MEALS

Plant-forward foods are having their moment, and finding ways to incorporate more plant-based options into your menu can add variety, meet different dietary needs and support nutrition and sustainability goals.

BY MARI BRAND

OCTOBER



 Dairy-Free
Daiya

Brought to you by SNA with
the generous support of
Daiya Foods.

Whether they're based on food allergies or intolerances, religion, culture, health or just personal preferences, special diets are something school nutrition programs always have to consider. No one wants a student to go hungry because there isn't a meal option available that they can eat, but catering to every student's dietary needs is undeniably a challenge, especially when demographics and diets differ between districts, schools, grade levels and can change year to year.

Plant-based—diets that exclude all meat as well as other animal products (also called “vegan”)—and plant-forward—diets that primarily feature plant-based ingredients, especially proteins, but still use some animal products (including vegetarian diets)—are two categories of special diets that have become relatively common, particularly among younger people. In fact, although most research agrees that only around 4 to 6% of Americans identify as fully plant-based or vegan, around 50% report following a plant-forward or “flexitarian” diet, while 37% reduced red meat consumption and 20% reduced white meat consumption over the past year according to McKinsey's Global Future of Food Survey in 2022 (mck.co/4svTnHE). On top of that, a recent poll from Chartwells K12 found that 37% of school-aged students said they would eat school lunch more often if more vegetarian and vegan choices were offered (bit.ly/SNMag-ChartwellsK12).

A plant-forward menu can also be more nutritious, better for the environment and more accommodating for a variety of special diets, not just vegan, vegetarian or flexitarian.



Foods like beans, lentils, tofu and whole grains provide important nutrients, including protein and fiber, while generally containing less saturated fat than many animal-based alternatives.

—Nora Stewart

Based on that level of demand alone, it's clear that plant-based meals have a valuable place on today's school menus. But in addition to meeting growing student dietary preferences, a plant-forward menu can also be more nutritious, better for the environment and more accommodating for a variety of special diets, not just vegan, vegetarian or flexitarian.

NUTRIENT-DENSE INGREDIENTS

Many common ingredients used in plant-based meals are very healthy, and they provide nutrients that are much more difficult to get through a diet that's too reliant on meat and other animal products. "Plant-based meals can help improve student nutrition by introducing more fiber-rich, nutrient-dense foods into school cafeterias," says Nora Stewart, senior program manager of Friends of the Earth's Climate-Friendly School Food program. "Foods like beans, lentils, tofu and whole grains provide important nutrients, including protein and fiber, while generally containing less saturated fat than many animal-based alternatives. Fiber is especially important because fewer than 3% of children get the recommended levels." As the name implies, plant-forward meals and diets are also more likely to incorporate vegetables and fruits into the main meal (rather than just as a side dish), which can make those foods more readily accepted by students.

ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY

On top of being healthy for us, plant-based foods are healthier for our planet too. "Plant-based meals are one of the most practical ways schools can reduce the environmental impact of the food they serve," says Stewart. "Compared with meat and dairy, plant proteins ge-



nerally produce fewer greenhouse gas emissions and require significantly less land and water to produce. For example, beans and lentils are estimated to be 26 to 34 times less carbon-intensive than beef and also use significantly less water."

When you consider how large-scale school meal operations are in the U.S., even replacing just a few meat-based meals with plant-based options can have a significant positive effect on the environment. "In New York City Public Schools, a recent assessment found that the greenhouse gas emissions associated with school food purchases declined by 59% between 2019 and 2025, largely driven by the district's shift toward more plant-based and plant-forward menus," Stewart shares.

INCLUSIVE OF OTHER SPECIAL DIETS, TOO

Back on the topic of special diets overall, including more plant-based or plant-forward meals on your menu can help accommodate other common types of special diets too, simplifying the already complicated process of developing a menu that needs to serve hundreds of students every day.

Students who follow halal or kosher diets may have restrictions around certain meats or how those meats are prepared. Plant-based dishes can provide an accessible alternative without requiring schools to source and prepare multiple types of animal proteins,
— Nora Stewart

“For example, students who follow halal or kosher diets may have restrictions around certain meats or how those meats are prepared. Plant-based dishes can provide an accessible alternative without requiring schools to source and prepare multiple types of animal proteins,” Stewart explains. “A chana masala bowl made with chickpeas, tomatoes and spices, for example, can be vegetarian, vegan, dairy-free, egg-free and suitable for many students following halal diets. Other examples include bean burritos, lentil chili, vegetable and rice bowls and falafel wraps.”

Entirely plant-based meals are also dairy and egg-free, which means they can easily accommodate students with lactose intolerance or milk or egg allergies (two of the big nine food allergens) in addition to students who follow a vegan, vegetarian, halal or kosher diet.

Still, “It’s important to recognize that plant-based doesn’t automatically mean allergen-free or compliant with every religious dietary requirement,” Stewart notes. Other big nine allergens like soy, wheat, sesame, tree nuts and peanuts are common ingredients in some plant-based recipes or foods, and managing cross-contamination

risks is another important consideration. “However, with thoughtful planning, plant-based recipes can help schools serve a broader range of students without creating an entirely separate menu for every dietary preference,” says Stewart.

MAKING THE MOVE TO A PLANT-FORWARD MENU

Like with any new school meal initiative, the key to shifting to a more plant-forward menu is to take it in smaller steps. “My biggest recommendation is to start with familiar dishes and ingredients that students already enjoy. Schools don’t need to overhaul their menus overnight to make meaningful progress. Introducing one new plant-based entrée, incorporating beans or lentils into an existing recipe, or offering a plant-based version of a student favorite can be a manageable first step,” says Stewart.

Whether you need recipe inspiration, tips for marketing new plant-based meals to all students (not just those who already follow a plant-based diet) or advice on how to make plant-forward meals work within your program’s staffing, budget, kitchen or equipment capabilities or limitations, there are resources available to help. Friends of the Earth’s Climate-Friendly School Food Program provides technical assistance to school districts interested in introducing more plant-forward meals, plus collections of plant-based K-12 recipes (bit.ly/foe-plant-based-recipes), marketing resources (foe.org/plant-based-materials) and student engagement strategies (foe.org/student-action-school-food). Other organizations and programs like the Chef Ann Foundation, Meatless Monday and the Plant Powered School Meals Coalition offer similar free, plant-forward food resources and guides geared toward school foodservice programs.

As with any proposed changes or new additions to a school menu, one of the most common concerns is “How do I get my students to actually eat it?” Survey data showing that more and more Americans are prioritizing plant-forward diets and that over 35% of students want more plant-based options is valuable information, but we know that theoretical data on student preferences isn’t always reflected once they actually enter the cafeteria.





This is where learning from and leaning on the larger school nutrition community comes in handy. In addition to resources available to make a transition to more plant-forward meals easier, there are also plenty of success stories from other school districts that have already started to make that shift. Friends of the Earth's "Building a Better Tray" resource (bit.ly/foe-building-a-better-tray) outlines examples of successful plant-based recipes and initiatives (including nutrition and cost breakdowns, lessons learned and why plant-forward recipes work for them) from eight school districts across the country, both rural and urban, ranging in size from under 150 students to over 16,000—evidence that no matter what your program's capabilities are, there's almost definitely an approach to plant-forward meals that can work for you.

Whether your motivations are making your program more environmentally friendly, reducing your reliance on highly-processed foods, satisfying changing student dietary preferences or simplifying accommodations for a variety of special diets at the same time, plant-based or plant-forward meals can check all those boxes. And with some research, inspiration from others' success stories and a willingness to take it slow, making the move to a more plant-forward menu can be less challenging and more rewarding, both for your program and your students, than you might think!

PLANT-BASED DIET MYTHS & MISCONCEPTIONS

Although plant-based and plant-forward diets are much more mainstream now than they were a few decades ago, there are still some common myths and misconceptions about plant-based foods that persist—let's debunk them!

1. PLANT-BASED DIETS AREN'T NUTRITIONALLY COMPLETE

One of the biggest myths about a 100% plant-based diet is that it can't provide all of the nutrients you need, especially protein. "In reality, whole-some foods like beans, lentils, tofu and tempeh are excellent sources of plant protein and calcium," says Stewart, adding that "they also provide fiber, an essential nutrient that most American children aren't getting enough of." Complete vs. incomplete protein is also a common concern, and while it's true that many plant-based protein sources are "incomplete" (meaning they don't contain all nine essential amino acids), there are several that are complete, including quinoa; soy-based products like tofu, tempeh and edamame; and some grains like buckwheat and amaranth. Plus, combining complementary plant-based ingredients like rice and beans, peanut butter and whole wheat bread, pita and hummus and more will all make up a complete protein source too.

2. BLAND, BORING AND UNAPPEALING

The idea that plant-based meals are inherently bland or boring is still widespread, and if you've ever been the victim of unseasoned, mushy tofu or undercooked lentils, you might believe it. But if they're seasoned and prepared properly, plant-based staples like beans, lentils, tofu, tempeh and more can be just as delicious as animal-based proteins. It's easy to apply the same seasonings or marinades you would use for meat to any plant-based alternatives, and if you learn the correct prep and cooking techniques for soy-based options like tofu and tempeh, you won't end up with the unappealing texture you might have experienced before. Plus, many common dishes from other parts of the world, particularly those found in Indian and East Asian cuisines, already use ingredients like lentils, chickpeas and tofu instead of meat, so there are plenty of recipes where plant-based proteins are the star of the show, not just a substitute.

3. OVERPRICED AND HIGHLY PROCESSED

Many people think plant-based foods are inherently more expensive or highly processed, and while that can be true for some specialty products or plant-based "meat" alternatives specifically formulated to taste or look like real meat, plant-based staples like beans and lentils are very affordable, versatile, minimally processed and can easily be bought in bulk to drive down the cost even further.



Mari Brand is Communications Specialist at SNA.



Make Everyone Say “Cheese!”

More than 1 in 3 Americans experience lactose malabsorption.*
Offering dairy-free alternatives helps create a more inclusive menu
for students. Make it easier to serve every student with Daiya!



WHY DAIYA CHEESE SAUCE?

-  **Big, creamy cheddar-style flavor** students love
-  **Dairy-free & allergen-friendly** for greater menu inclusivity
-  **Made for menu versatility** – nachos, mac & cheese, fries, bowls, veggies & more
-  **Easy to use** – simply heat, serve and get creative



**Give every student
more reasons to say
YES to cheese.**

**We'd love
to Send You
a Sample!**

