

PLAYBOOK FOR A PLANT-RICH DIET

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How to Eat Less Meat and More Plants



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The phrase “plant-rich diet” has been gaining traction in the past several years as we seek solutions to curb the greenhouse gas emissions from the food system that are contributing to global climate change.

The production of animal-based food, especially beef and dairy, contributes a huge portion of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions – nearly 20%. If cows were their own country, they would be the third largest greenhouse gas emitter after China and the U.S. (Project Drawdown).

“The food system must undergo significant changes to ensure a future that can adequately feed a growing population while avoiding the worst impacts of climate change,” according to the World Resources Institute, an environmental think tank that recently came out with a study – “Playbook for Guiding Diners Toward Plant-Rich Dishes in Food Service.”

Put simply, a plant-rich diet is not vegetarian or vegan but seeks to limit the consumption of animal-based food in favor of adding more fruits and vegetables, beans, grains, legumes, mushrooms, nuts and seeds, plant oils, herbs, and spices.

Americans consume way more meat, dairy, and calories overall than most countries, and even our country’s own nutritional recommendations. This over-consumption has important negative implications for health, with high amounts of red meat consumption associated with type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, and certain cancers (National Institutes of Health).

Luckily for us, there is guidance out there on creative ways to increase the amount of plants in our diets, with the World Resources Institute offering 23 science-based suggestions to change consumer behavior. These interventions are rooted in evidence from the field of behavioral economics, that is the study of the effects of psychology, cognitive, emotional, cultural, and social factors on economic decisions.

While these interventions are targeted towards the food-service industry (i.e., chefs, restaurants, nutritionists, cafeterias, etc.), many of the recommendations are highly applicable to those who cook for themselves or others. There are also recommendations that might make sense for the Coop, in terms of how it markets, promotes, and prices plant-based foods.

One strategy suggests adapting popular recipes to reduce their meat content. For example, when making lasagna or tacos, replace ground beef with mushrooms or plant-based meat alternatives (like those produced by Beyond Meats or Impossible Foods and available in the Coop's frozen food section). Also, if hosting a dinner party, hosts can offer plant-rich starters and appetizers to encourage folks to fill up on these before serving a main dish that might have less meat. Both of these strategies have been proven to reduce meat consumption.

Another option is to improve the flavor and texture of plant-rich dishes. Plant-rich dishes are often considered "healthy" options, rather than "tasty" or "delicious" choices. Flavor-boosting ingredients like herbs, spices, garlic, citrus juices, oils, vinegars and prepared sauces can drastically change the profile of a dish, without sacrificing health benefits that many people desire. For inspiration, check out a database of appealing plant-rich dishes from the Good Food Institute (<http://goodfoodscorecard.org/>).

The Coop could improve shoppers' awareness of the benefits of plant-rich dishes and the opportunities to add more plants (or plant-based meat alternatives) to dishes. In the same way that the Coop produces guides for dairy, eggs, meat, seafood, and many other products, it could also produce a guide to plant-based substitutes for meat, and position it next to the meat shelf to encourage consumers to second-guess

their need to make meat the center of a dish, or to consider alternatives for common meat-based recipes.

Most consumers don't think about "climate change" when making purchasing decisions, but the Coop could help remind members of these benefits via shopping guides and promotional actions for plant-based meat alternatives and common plant substitutes for meat. These guides could focus more on the positive attributes of plants – taste, quality, or interesting preparation techniques or substitutions – rather than on the negative aspects of ruminant animal meat production as a way to get shoppers excited about making different buying choices.

Ultimately, all food has an environmental impact that depends on a range of factors – how it's produced, the inputs involved, the efficiency with which those inputs are used, how food is harvested, transported, sold, consumed or wasted, and what is done with that waste.

From a climate standpoint, beef production has some serious drawbacks that should encourage environmentally-conscious consumers to second-guess default desires to consume meat. Beef production requires 20 times more land and emits 20 times more greenhouse gases per gram of protein than production of plant-based proteins like beans, peas and lentils, according to the World Resources Institute. And in many parts of the world, clearing land for cows and other ruminant livestock comes at the expense of rainforests or other forested land, which has the added effect of also removing the planet's "sink" for carbon emissions as trees take carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere.

That said, there are efforts by smaller farmers to raise cattle and other animals in more environmentally and socially responsible ways (the Coop buys its meat from these producers, like Ken Jaffe of Slope Farmers). But this production amounts to a tiny fraction of global beef production, so most climate scientists still advise that reducing beef consumption is a necessary component of any strategy to address climate change.

At the same time, food-buying decisions are often influenced by a range of factors that aren't "rational" even if shoppers care about pressing global threats like climate change and want to use their purchasing power to make an impact. Understanding more about those environmental impacts, and solutions that shoppers can take, can help consumers make more informed choices about how to shop with their values.

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