

Plant-based innovation trends - now and beyond 2020

By [Hayley Richardson](#)

7 Sep 2020

Plant-based has been a growing food trend for some years now, and with greater consumer interest has come better product innovation. But we've also seen increased sophistication in consumer tastes, and much higher expectations in terms of quality of taste and texture, especially in the plant protein space.



Hayley Richardson

With that in mind, what can we expect to see in the near future when it comes to protein alternatives? In my current research and development role at one of the world's leading plant-based food companies, I am lucky enough to be at the forefront of some of the most exciting technological, agricultural and scientific food innovations.

Improvements in food tech and product development

There are a variety of different proteins and technologies that are quickly proving themselves to be options in our final formulations. Having seen the growth and potential in the category, a number of protein suppliers have been innovating with plant-based consumer foods in mind.

The result has been cleaner, flavour neutral proteins coming into the commercial space. This is exciting because historically we have had flavour undertones that we've needed to mask, but now we have a more neutral base from which to work. Soy has been predominant in the plant-based meat space, but the next few years we will see an explosion of a variety of alternatives including seeds such as yellow pea, faba and mung.



Image credit: Fry Family Food Co.

I also believe that texturally we are going to see a closer resemblance to meat-like structures with the added benefit of cleaner labels. We are very focused on ingredient labels that are legible and understandable to the everyday consumer – ensuring that our products have recognisable ingredients.

There is also a focus on better bioavailability, in other words, we want to make sure the goodness is easily absorbed and used by our bodies. Plant proteins need to equal or better the qualities of meat, not only from a texture and taste point of view but also from a nutritional point of view. To shift consumer mindset and to encourage more consumer trial (and loyalty) we need to make the eating experience of plant proteins equivalent to that of meat.

What do consumers want?

So what are consumers looking for at the moment, given the year that we've all had? Well, essentially, consumers want what they've always wanted - tasty, nutritious food. Another layer to that is a much stronger focus on meal occasions. Family and eating at home has become more popular in 2020 with so many people isolating at home.

Hearty family meals are comforting and have an emotional effect on people. There is no doubt they contribute to a feeling of well-being, and this is one of the reasons why it's become so important. I believe this trend will continue in 2021, now that people have reconnected with themselves and their families.

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30 Jul 2020





I also believe that plant-based protein products have fallen into this space with ease, offering healthier meat equivalents that can be enjoyed in the same family recipes and traditional dishes.

Interestingly though, 'cheat meals' is also a big trend likely to carry through into 2021, and having plant protein equivalents in our favourite cheat meals, such as fast food burgers, is becoming increasingly important.

I have been in plant-based innovation for over 12 years, and never have I seen the awareness and interest from retailers and consumers that I am seeing now. The plant-based protein category has traditionally had to fight for recognition and acceptance, but this is no longer the case. We are officially mainstream now, and I could not be prouder and more excited about what the future holds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[[<https://www.linkedin.com/in/hayley-richardson-398321171/> Hayley Richardson]] heads up New Product Development at South African plant-based food company [[<https://www.fryfamilyfood.com/za/> Fry Family Food Co.]] In March 2020, Fry's entered into a partnership with the Livekindly Co., a new global collective of plant-based heritage and start-up brands. Hayley has stepped into the role of Research and Development for the Livekindly Co., bringing her 12 years of product development experience to the collective.

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