



BURGER REVOLUTION

From drive-thrus to fast-casual eateries, restaurants everywhere are going plant-based. Buckle up as author **Mark Hawthorne** explores the fastest-growing trend in convenience eating.

WHEN

White Castle became the first fast-food chain to sell the Impossible Burger last April, it signaled a dramatic shift in the meals-to-go marketplace. By offering a plant-based slider that sizzles, smells, and savors like its animal-derived counterpart, White Castle is courting not just vegetarians, but mainstream burger-lovers who want their comfort food served with a side of social responsibility. Meatless, it seems, is no longer just for Mondays.

With animal agriculture one of the

alternatives, and the selection gets bigger every day. But the real stars are veggie-based businesses that are establishing a powerful presence in an industry long dominated by golden arches and frosty-haired Southern colonels. Why settle for a cheeseless pizza or an order of fries when you can choose from an entire menu that puts the focus on plants?

Secret sauce

Even in the 21st century, not every new development is a winner (remember Google glasses?), but the popularity of plant-based fast food is spreading like mustard on a bun. As the world's first I-can't-believe-it's-not-meat burger joint, VeganBurg specializes in juicy

Indeed, Veggie Grill is a near-perfect example of how rapidly the vegan fast-food market is growing. The 12-year-old chain has 35 all-vegan restaurants across the country and plans to double that number by 2020. Heeley observes a generational shift in dining preferences that seems to be behind the mainstreaming of herbivorous fast food. "Our research concluded that millennials eat 52 percent more vegetables than other generations," he says, "which is why we're committed to bringing Veggie Grill's chef-driven, veggie-centric food to Chicago, Boston, Berkeley, and New York." It also recently opened its first college concept location on the University of California Los Angeles campus.



BY THE NUMBERS

Here is a quick look at how historical fast-food figures stack up.

160,000

The number of fast-food restaurants in the United States

50 MILLION

The number of customers fast-food restaurants serve each day

leading causes of climate change and environmental destruction—not to mention the suffering of animals—more consumers than ever are opting for veg-forward cuisine. A 2018 market analysis by Nielsen found that sales of vegan foods are far outpacing the growth of non-vegan foods, especially among people of color and millennials. Recent research from Mintel, meanwhile, reveals that food taste and health benefits are also primary reasons for choosing plant-based options. This could explain why mobile food-ordering company GrubHub saw vegan orders grow by nearly 20 percent in 2017.

Grab-and-go chains such as Au Bon Pain, Chipotle, Subway, and Taco Bell have taken notice; each company offers at least one menu item to satisfy consumers hungry for compassionate

patties made from soy or mushrooms. "Someone needed to start it to prove that the concept would work," says Alex Tan, who founded VeganBurg in Singapore in 2010. He opened a San Francisco location in 2015, energizing the Haight-Ashbury district with bold burger flavors like avocado beetroot and char-grilled satay. "Our vision is to be the burger of the new generation."

Veggie Grill, another early adopter, was one of the first chains to add the Beyond Burger to its extensive menu of hot sandwiches, bowls, and shareable sides. "Our core consumers are millennials and mindful eaters of all demographics that live throughout the US but are concentrated in major cities," says CEO Steve Heeley, who adds that just 20 percent of customers identify as vegetarian.

Although their chain isn't expanding as rapidly as Veggie Grill, Andy and Rachel Berliner have an equally ambitious plan for their company. The duo may be best known for their line of frozen entrées sold under the label Amy's Kitchen, a brand named after their daughter. The products have been a mainstay among vegetarians for three decades, so when the Berliners cooked up the idea for a drive-thru, it was a natural extension of their passion for convenience food with a conscience. "For over 20 years, people have been asking us to open a drive-thru," says Andy. "Many of our customers said they just don't want their kids eating traditional fast-food fare, so we finally did it." The sustainability-focused restaurant opened in Rohnert Park, CA in 2015. "It wasn't easy, but the response

has been fantastic." The company prides itself on offering local, organic fare, and they'll be opening a second location in neighboring Marin County soon with a long-term goal of Amy's Drive Thru across the country.

Taking root

Perhaps the most inspiring trend isn't the customer seeking plant-based food, but the skeptical meat-lover who's won over. Nicole Marquis, who founded the Philadelphia-based chain HipCityVeg in 2012, estimates that less than 20 percent of her customers are vegetarian. Diners often walk in having no idea the restaurant doesn't serve animal-based food. "I'm not trying to trick anyone," she says. "Veg is in the name. But people come in, they see 'chicken' is spelled a little differently, they eat it, and say,

In a way, Landau says, he and Jacoby are getting back to their roots, since this is how they were cooking in the mid-'90s. "I love being able to channel some two decades of fancy cooking back into my love of sandwiches," he says. Landau admits the challenge is bigger because they're in the cheesesteak capital of the world. "So we have to work extra hard to make sure that our product is that much more delicious and satisfying. That said, it's shocking how many people will opt for the vegan version of the cheesesteak even though they're not vegan themselves. It's at least 75 percent omnivore in there."

Nourishing noms

Almost every plant-centered, quick-service restaurant offers nostalgia-layered entrées such as animal-free beef burgers, chicken sandwiches, and chili cheese fries, but

otherwise would not have thought about trying a plant-based burger."

As research shows, the health benefits of a plant-based diet are a big draw for people reducing their consumption of animals.

"Some people come to us because their doctors told them to eat less meat," says Andy Kalish, who teamed up with his wife Gina Marino-Kalish to open their eponymous counter-serve eatery Kāl'ish in Chicago in 2016 with creative sandwiches like their Green Mash-Up (veggie patty with avocado verde mash, leafy greens, and almond ricotta) and the jackfruit-based Pulled Pork-N-Jack. "They will hug us because they feel relief that our foods are so familiar and delicious, so eating plant-based becomes easy." Ultimately, the joy for the Kalishs is showing people how satisfying vegan fast food can be. "We get

80 PERCENT

The percentage of fast-food diners who eat fast food at least once a month

836

The number of calories in the average fast-food meal



19 PERCENT

The percentage that vegan GrubHub orders grew in 2017

"That was the best chicken sandwich ever." When unsuspecting customers are told they've just eaten a plant-based chicken sandwich, they're amazed. "We love that," says Marquis. "We don't try to compete with other vegan restaurants. We try to compete with the best fast-casual restaurants in the world."

Chef Rich Landau knows just what she means. After the huge success of their high-end Philadelphia restaurant Vedge, Landau and his wife, Kate Jacoby, expanded their vegan empire last year with Wiz Kid, a plant-based cheesesteak shop where the signature sandwich is made from seitan, mushrooms, fried onions, and rutabaga "wiz" on a potato roll. "At the end of the day, people just love good food," says Landau. "Make it taste great, and no one will really question what's not in there."

some also put a premium on ethics. The all-vegan, Oregon-based Next Level Burger (NLB), for example, is committed to stuffing buns with natural ingredients. "Everything we serve is produced through the filter of 'would we put that in front of our kiddos?'" says Matt de Gruyter, who opened the first NLB with his wife, Cierra, in 2014. The couple is even careful not to offer chocolate in their shakes that's the product of child slavery—a major issue even with some vegan chocolate. "When it comes to things like chocolate and where it's sourced, it is so important that we put our money where our mouth is," he adds.

Of the thousands who dine at NLB every day, only about 30 percent are vegan or vegetarian, says de Gruyter. "It's been a great opportunity for us to both preach to our choir and speak to people who maybe

to change minds every day about what it means to eat a burger."

Since the popular fast-food rubric "quick and tasty" is now being enthusiastically applied to plant-based menus, it's clear that speedy vegan service has gone from the fringe to the forefront. And while it is true that name-brand outlets are beginning to recognize that meat-free dining is a genuine cultural shift, it's entrepreneurs with a talent for creating trendsetting plant-based fare who are pioneering a new wave of ethical eating. That's good news, because consumers have a growing appetite for vegan food—no matter how fast it's served. **W**

Mark Hawthorne (markhawthorne.com) is the author of the upcoming 10th-anniversary edition of *Striking at the Roots: A Practical Guide to Animal Activism*.

EVERYWHERE EATS

For many, meatless restaurants aren't always just around the corner—not yet, anyway. But plant-based meals can be hacked from popular non-vegan restaurants with a little know-how.



au bon pain

Many of the soups at Au Bon Pain are vegan, including the Curried Rice and Lentil, Tuscan White Bean, and **French Moroccan Tomato Lentil**. The Vegetarian Chili is also vegan.



Hidden vegan treasures are the **French Toast Sticks** and Dutch Apple Pie. Vegans can also enjoy a Garden Side Salad, fries, and hash browns.



Pickings are slim here, though the fries, hash rounds, and **hash-brown nuggets** are vegan.



The **bowls, burritos, salads, and tacos** can be made vegan by ordering them with sofritas instead of meat.



Order the 8 Layer Veggie Burrito without cheese, rice, and sour cream; the **½ lb. Bean & Cheese Burrito** dairy-free; or the Signature Taco Salad sans meat, cheese, and sour cream. The crinkle-cut fries make the vegan cut, too.



Domino's

The **thin-crust pizza** is vegan if ordered with no cheese and their original sauce.



Try the **Veggie Delite sandwich** on Italian or sourdough bread, skipping the cheese and mayonnaise, and replacing with mustard and sweet onion sauce.



TACO BELL

Order any non-vegan item with beans instead of meat, and “fresco style,” where cheese, ranch sauce, and sour cream are replaced with fresh pico de gallo. The chips, **cinnamon twists**, and Mexican rice are also vegan.



The oldest fast-food chain in the US offers vegan hash browns, fries, and two plant-based burgers: a Veggie Slider and the **Impossible Slider**.