

BACK OF HOUSE



PLANT-FORWARD

Plant-based eating: here to stay and it's big business

BY ROSIE SCHWARTZ

“Plant-based eating is not a trend. It’s here to stay and it is big business,” says Chef David Lee, co-owner of Planta, an upscale, plant-based eatery. His other restaurant, Nota Bene, does offer a variety of meat selections. At Nota Bene, along with perennial patron favourites such as the restaurant’s Canadian Prime Striploin, choices such as Zucchini Lasagna and Cashew Ricotta, Pomodoro, and Olive Oil are also being featured on a regular basis.

The movement termed the plant-forward diet is gaining a lot of traction these days. Some are calling it *flexitarian*. No matter what you call it, plant-forward means the inclusion of more plant-based foods in everyday eating patterns. Chef Lee points out that at home when he was growing up, with his Asian background, there were four vegetable dishes for every one containing any meat. While vegetarians (those who may consume dairy products and or eggs) or vegans (those who eat no animal products at all) would be included in this eating style,

plant-forward eating doesn’t mean shunning meat. It’s really about offering the option of meatless meals, and filling up plates with added whole plant foods such as whole grains; fruits and vegetables along with pulses, such as lentils and chick peas; and nuts and seeds.

Health Canada, in their revision of Canada’s Food Guide, is moving in this direction. The agency has recently released their proposed recommendations. For the first time, under their Guiding Principles, the agency recommends regular intake of vegetables, fruit, whole grains and protein-rich foods, especially plant-based sources of protein, as part of the foundation for healthy eating.

Another first is for Health Canada to include consideration about the environment in their proposals. Choosing more plant-based options is not just for personal health. A plant-forward diet supplies benefits for planetary health as well, an issue that is getting more and more

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attention and affecting Canadian attitudes. Plants such as pulses, including lentils, and beans have a low carbon footprint and use just one-tenth to half of the water of other proteins. They also promote sustainability as they enrich the soil they’re grown in.

Plant-Forward Global 50 is a recent initiative by both the Culinary Institute of America and the EAT Foundation—an international foundation linking food, health and sustainable development across science, business and policy—that is seeking to highlight the plant-forward movement. The group has compiled a global list of 50 chefs and restaurants who are advancing plant-forward food choices, each in their own way, and providing inspiration for change.



The list of innovators and leaders includes notables such as U.S. chefs José Andrés, Thomas Keller, Alice Waters and Ana Sortun and international chefs such as Paul Svensson (The Restaurant at Fotografiska in Sweden), René Redzepi (Noma in Denmark) and Yotam Ottolenghi (Ottolenghi in London).


Here in Canada, chefs are looking toward change as well. In 2017, on Restaurants Canada’s eighth annual Canadian Chef Survey of more than 560 professional chefs, where respondents rated a variety of menu items and cooking methods as either a Hot Trend or an Up and Comer—vegie-centric cuisine and ancient grains made the Up and Comer list.



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Not only upscale dining establishments are involved in these types of initiatives, but burger eateries are getting in on the action. The James Beard Foundation has partnered with the Mushroom Council to host the Blended Burger Project, which encourages chefs to create a healthier, more sustainable and flavourful burger; providing the tastes that consumers are looking for while informing diners about the many benefits of The Blend. Consumers and restaurateurs today are more aware concerning food choices and their effects both on our health and the environment. For the past few years, the project has hosted a contest for the best blended burger recipe.

The Blend calls for incorporating mushrooms as 25 per cent of the burger patty (at least). Mushrooms work well as they add umami—the Holy Grail of tastes—while at the same time decreasing the calories, fat and sodium of a burger while retaining the moisture. When you put that together with sustainability and cost factors, it’s easy to see why some eateries have included blended burgers on the menu as regular items. In the US, where school lunches are the norm, many foodservice companies are now putting blended mushrooms on the menu in order to meet various requirements.

Chef Lee says, “We’ve come a long way from the [days when] the only vegetarian dish on a menu was Penne Arrabiata.” In fact, at many dining establishments, the vegetarian choice was simply a plateful of unadorned vegetables. If you look at restaurant menus these days, the variety and appeal of plant-based options are just as tempting to carnivores. 

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IN 2016, INDUSTRY EXPERTS SUCH AS TECHNOMIC FORECASTED A DRAMATIC INCREASE IN THE INCLUSION OF PLANT-BASED FOODS ON CANADIAN MENUS.

Plant-based comfort foods: Veggies are moving to the centre of the plate as people choose to avoid meat on more occasions, with some going vegetarian or vegan. These dining and diet trends, combined with environmental concerns, are fuelling growth of plant-based restaurants. Make no mistake: This won’t result in rabbit food or a weight-loss fad. It’s veggies, done tasty, creative and satisfying. Plant-based comfort food such as pizzas, burgers and burritos will drive the trend in 2017.

Source: Technomic Report: 5 ways Canadian Foodservice will change in 2017

Menus of Change

Menus of Change, The Business of Healthy, Sustainable, Delicious Food Choices, a joint collaboration from The Culinary Institute of America and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, is a long-term, practical vision integrating optimal nutrition and public health, environmental stewardship and restoration, and social responsibility concerns within the foodservice industry and the culinary profession.

It was at their fifth annual leadership summit that making plant-forward dining a mainstream concept in the culinary profession and foodservice industry was on the agenda and led to the Plant-Forward Global 50 initiative. The influential initiative has attracted thousands of leaders in the foodservice industry around this vision and more than 80 per cent of summit participants have changed their menus and dining formats as a result of their attendance at the program.