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Meat eaters devouring vegetarian market

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Hard as it may seem to believe, the growth in the UK vegetarian food market is not being driven by vegetarians themselves. In fact, a new survey carried out by the Food and Drink Federation ([FDF](#)) shows that meat eaters looking for a bit of variety are the main reasons for the success of the £582 million (€814m) market.

A survey from the FDF's Vegetarian (Meat-Free) Liaison Group, launched in November 2002 to bring together key vegetarian and meat-free food producers in one of the most dynamic and innovative sectors of the UK food industry, revealed that two thirds of Britons have eaten a meat-free meal in 2003.

Of those, 7 per cent were vegetarians while over half (58 per cent) cited variety as the main reason for choosing a meat-free meal.

One in three (34 per cent) bought meat-substitute products such as veggie sausages, kebabs or burgers for their main evening meal, the survey showed, while 84 per cent enjoyed pasta dishes, two-thirds (65 per cent) opted for meat-free pizza and 55 per cent tucked into ready meals.

Variety is the key to growth in the vegetarian food market in the UK, the survey showed. Although the sector has grown 8 per cent in the last year, the survey revealed that one in four (26 per cent) would still like more choice. A third (35 per cent) of those that had not eaten a meat-free meal said that a wider choice might tempt them to try a meat-free option.

The cost of meat-free options is also a potential barrier to consumption, with nearly a third (29 per cent) of those questioned by the FDF saying they would be persuaded by money off promotions. Nearly half (46 per cent) said they would be happy to try a meat-free meal if offered by friends or family.

Commenting on the survey, the FDF's deputy director general Martin Paterson said: *"The processed meat-free sector has developed considerably over the past decade with more products than ever appearing on supermarkets shelves. The quality of products in this sector has also dramatically improved helping to sustain the growth in this sector."*

Among the other interesting findings of the survey were the fact that vegetarian food is often seen as healthier than meat-based meals, with 15 per cent of respondents citing health as the main reason for choosing a meat-free meal.

Perhaps related to this health aspect is the fact that meat-free meals were most popular with the 65 and over age group, with seven out of 10 eating them in 2003. The other segment of the population traditionally obsessed with health - 16 to 24 year olds - are also big consumers of meat-free meals, with 69 per cent of them having done so in 2003.

Of those that had not eaten any meat-free meals this year, nearly half (49 per cent) said the main reason was that they liked meat or poultry in all their main meals. One in four (24 per cent) said that meat-free products did not appeal, with one in six (15 per cent) admitting that they had never considered a meat-free meal at all.

While the meat-free market may well have taken off as a result of consumers seeking 'safe' alternatives to meat after a wave of crises such as BSE and FMD, this does not

appear to be the case any longer.

And while the growth of the meat-free market might once have been seen as a threat to the meat sector, the FDF survey shows that this is not in fact the case - most people eating meat-free products are doing so simply for variety rather than as a replacement for meat as a whole.