

Meat analog magic: has meatless gone mainstream? Increased demand for all types of non-meat, high-protein alternatives creates profitable ventures for today's food manufacturers.(PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT)

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Walk into the freezer or refrigerated section of any grocery store and you will likely find a diverse assortment of meatless alternatives and meat analogs, designed to broaden consumer appeal and acceptance.

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There has, in fact, been a notable shift in the profile of consumers buying meat substitutes, including those in the United States, notes Henk W. Hoogenkamp, an expert based in the Netherlands who has written several books on the topic of meat analogs. "Way back in the '60s, the market for meat analogs was mainly driven by pure vegetarians. Those 'hard liners' sacrificed taste and texture and ate the product no matter what," he observes. "Over the years, the definition of vegetarianism has changed, I am not talking about the many sub-categories here, such as pesco, lacto, ovo, lacto-ovo vegetarians, but I am talking about an entire new category called the 'lifestyle consumer.'"

Other observers note a similar surge in lifestyle-driven consumers. "This category [meat analog] isn't just supported by vegetarians. It is based on folks who have balanced lifestyles, making sure that overall they are living a healthier lifestyle. They eat meat on a certain day and eat meatless on other days," says Tom Moe, brand manager for Madison, WI-based Boca Foods, part of food conglomerate Kraft Foods Inc.

To accommodate an evolving consumer base, manufacturers have been at work developing new meatless products, many of them value-added or presented in a meal solution format.

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Boca is one example. After successfully launching a meatless pizza line in 2002, the company decided to pursue more entree-style products.

"Those did very well in the marketplace, and with that we dovetailed into convenient meal solutions," says Moe, adding that that a meatless lasagna made with ground Boca burgers was introduced nationally to a strong reception among retailers and consumers.

Most recently, Boca introduced a meatless chili. "Once again, we are leveraging the ground burger as an ingredient. The flavor is very bold, and if you look at the profile it is a nutritional poster child, with thirteen grams of fiber and one-hundred and fifty calories," Moe says.

Other analog manufacturers have been working on meatless meal solutions as well. Battle Creek, MI-based Kellogg USA Inc., which started in the meat analog business

decades ago, has introduced Morningstar Farms[™] Chili Pot Pie, made of three-bean blends, pieces of veggie burger, tomatoes, and spices topped with pieces of cornbread. Even a veggie burger isn't just a veggie burger anymore with Morningstar[R], which offers varieties like Spicy Black Bean Veggie Burgers, Portabella Mushroom and Oven Roasted Vegetable Veggie Burgers, and Philly Cheese Steak Veggie Burgers, in addition to veggie burger-style and sausage-style crumbles for use in recipes.

Another leading meat substitute vendor, Gardenburger Authentic Foods Co., Irvine, CA, has delved into the heat-and-serve arena with an assortment of Gardenburger[R] Meals, including Meatless Herb Grilled Chicken with Vegetables, Meatless Meatballs with Penne Marinara, Meatless Citrus Glazed Chicken with Green Beans and Rice, and Meatless Meatloaf with Broccoli and Red Peppers.

In addition to veggie burgers used in different applications like lasagna, meatballs, and chili, tofu is being developed in innovative ways for meat substitute products. One example is a line of TofuTown[™] Grilled Tofu Tenders from White Wave, a business of Dallas-based Dean Foods/Morningstar Foods. The pre-marinated, tofu-based meal solutions are available in varieties such as Havana Black Bean, Mediterranean Tahini, Sesame Ginger Teriyaki, and Tamari, and the company recently led a major couponing and sampling effort to promote them.

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Meanwhile, just as veggie burgers were created to give beef and other ground-meat burgers a run for consumers' money, some analog processors are trying to do the same with other traditional meat products. Morningstar Farms, for example, offers Veggie Dogs[™], including veggie corn dogs and mini corn dogs, while a company called Mon Cuisine Natural Products in Maspeth, NY, has introduced a party favorite box with vegan cocktail franks. On the lunchmeat side, Ian's Natural Foods, Revere, MA, recently introduced a line called Ian's Today's Deli Meatless Deli Meat, which includes meatless New York-style pastrami. And the Lightlife brand, owned by Omaha, NE-based ConAgra Foods, includes Smart Deli[R] Slices and Smart Dogs[R] fashioned from soy protein.

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Although a lot of the recent R & D focus in this industry has been on new applications for soy protein and vegetable protein, there has been a move afoot to improve the appetite-appeal of the products, which have earned a hard rap of sorts over the years. Boca, for example, recently developed new-and-improved chicken patties and nuggets, and it reformulated its line of meatless breakfast links and patties.

"It all comes down to taste in this category," acknowledges Moe. "In terms of overall advancements in the meatless arena, the two main ones have been centered around removing beany flavors and improving texture. Mouthfeel is extremely important to our customers."

Hoogenkamp believes that there is category potential for even better product formulations. "Technology capabilities of both semi-moist extruded meat analogs and integrated textured particles have greatly improved over the last few years," he relays, noting that most of that technology has been driven by entrepreneurial companies.

On the other hand, Hookegnamp says many major manufacturers haven't effectively positioned their range of textured-soy proteins for the meat-analog segment.

"In the past, meat-free products such as burgers and patties were mainly based on textured soy protein combinations embedded in a finely-comminuted emulsion. It is clear that modern consumers have moved forward and are demanding products of better quality such as texture, bite, and flavor," he points out. "Products that are based on soy protein only cannot deliver these properties."

As a result, Hoogenkamp reports that some technologies are now focused on using integrated textured particles made from combinations like wheat gluten, pea protein, soy protein, lupein protein, egg albumen, and modified food starch.

In addition to advancements in soy protein and vegetable protein, there have been improvements in the equipment used to produce analogs.

To some degree, capabilities for high-tech equipment and new product development are improving because many once-small vegetarian manufacturers are now part of larger food companies with more resources. To name just a few, the Lightlife brand was bought by ConAgra, the Boca brand was acquired by Oscar Mayer, and the White Wave brand is now under the Dean Foods umbrella.

Sarah Delea, spokeswoman for Boca (and also for the Oscar Mayer family of products), says the arrangement among various Kraft divisions has proven beneficial in a variety of ways.

"We always bring in our suppliers when we talk about products from beginning to end. With the Boca pizza, for example, when we were looking at the development of meatless pepperoni, we asked what type of equipment was needed. And with experience on the meat side, we have learnings from that," she says.

Some experts add that meat-processing companies would be well-served to keep an eye on, and maybe a hand in, the analog market. "Of course there is a future for traditional meat companies who want to enter the lifestyle segment. I am not talking about old-style meat products such as pastrami or corned beef. But every meat product of which the perception can be changed basically classifies," says Hoogenkamp.

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