

UAE



↑ The technological advancement in the agricultural field has brought about a significant increase in the plant-based food produce.

Plant-based products gain currency in changing world

SHARJAH

The demand for plant-based products has been on the rise in the Gulf including the UAE and Saudi Arabia, influenced by the global trend towards plant-based diets and sustainability

Plant-based food products have become a trend. In the region and due to multi-faceted health problems as well as the rise on environmental concerns, there has been a huge following, a fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) company, operational in 50 countries, has observed.

On the other hand, through the January 15, 2023-published "Plant-Based Meat Alternatives: Technological, Nutritional, Environmental, Market and Social Challenges and Opportunities," the six researchers-writers, led by Giulia Andreani, had figured that plant-based meat substitutes would be worth \$33.99 billion (Dhs) 24,841,361,150.00) by 2027.

Andreani's team, in the research paper published over PubMedCentral, had noted that so far and worldwide, the most represented food category were plant-based proteins at 426 (99 per cent) of 1,469. These are food products that do not intend to mimic any existing food products such as burgers, sausage, nuggets and meatballs but can still be considered as meat substitutes for these are protein-rich plant food like teriyaki tofu, fried gluten with peanuts and patty/burger alternatives.

The authors stated: "The idea of processing plant-based ingredients to obtain protein-based

foods is not a new concept for consumers since many products, such as tempeh, tofu, and seitan, have been available on the market for hundreds of years, especially in Asian countries. However, these products were not intended to be meat substitutes per se and have never become mainstream in Western countries."

The authors also wrote: "The development of the so-called 'meat alternatives' sector is gaining more and more attention due to growing concerns over the environmental impacts of high meat consumption on human health."

Recently interviewed and out of the "Gulfood 2024" was IFFCO Group-Culinary managing director Andrey Dribney on management experience regarding consumer preferences juxtaposed with those who opt for natural beef and venison.

Incidentally from "Gulfood 2024," the plant-based craze was indeed felt because even from the Philippine delegation, at least 14 food exporters had struck deals for their respective halal-certified plant-based food products.

Moreover, in one of the largest chains of supermarkets in the region, Gulf Today had seen from the shelves Philippine-produced plant-based meat staples.

Dribney stated: "The demand for plant-based products has been on the rise in the Gulf including the UAE and Saudi Arabia, influenced by the global trend toward plant-based diets and sustainability."

"In the UAE, the demand for plant-based products has seen a double-digit growth due to increased awareness of health and environmental concerns. The UAE's diverse population and its role as a global business hub have also contributed to a growing interest in alternative food choices, including plant-based options," he also said.

For these, IFFCO "opened" in 2023 the first plant-based meat factory in the region with the purpose of "building a resilient and sustainable food chain wherein 'cutting-edge technology' is utilised."

Dribney was asked with regard to manufactured plant-based meat which means the production requires salt and other curing ingredients for long shelf-life: "We use Faba beans, an ancient crop, born in the Middle East 10,000 years ago. This small bean is climate-smart, healing and enriching soil with nitrogen through its magical roots. Faba bean contributes to sustainable regenerative agriculture for management of soil fertility. By consuming food crafted with faba bean we are giving back, boost-

ing the sustainable development of agriculture. We use lower levels of saturated fat and cholesterol."

Thumay University Hospital (Ajman) dietitian-clinical nutritionist Fahma Jafri said: "The majority of meat substitutes consist of legumes, soy, pulses, and peas together with other fillers. A vegetarian diet has been linked to a decrease risk of illness and mortality for decades. This is the reason that a lot of meat lovers have recently become vegetarians or vegans. However, individuals have begun to add plant-based meats in their diets to simulate the flavour of meat."

"There is not much harm in enjoying a plant-based steak or burger occasionally till vegans understand how natural products always outweigh the processed ones. Numerous patients who started on replacing meat burgers or nuggets with plant-based products have given the feedback about the specific plant aroma and pungent after taste of the products. I strongly believe that swap of natural plant-based proteins with meat analogues is not much value. Reason being the unnecessary attention given to mimic the 'meat taste' by adding additives, fillers, and non-nutritious products," Jafri added. She cautioned on the "salt, sugars, and unhealthy fat sauces."

Maricela Lara-Puyal, Senior Reporter