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## PRESSEMITTEILUNG

### **Showcase Bioeconomy: Meat substitute products: Advertising not appealing to flexitarians**

**More and more people are reducing meat consumption in favor of plant-based alternatives. However, current marketing does not sufficiently reach a large target group of flexitarians.**

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**Around 75 million people in Europe eat vegetarian or vegan food, and the trend is rising. The number of flexitarians, i.e. those people who are increasingly concerned about the sustainability of their food consumption and wish to limit their meat consumption, is much greater still. But for many consumers who want to replace products of animal origin partially or completely, finding the right information, including how to avoid nutritional deficiencies, is a challenge. The EIT food communication project "The V-Place," which works toward the acceptance and spread of plant-based food products and is coordinated by the University of Hohenheim's Research Center for Bioeconomy in Stuttgart, deals with the question as to how these information gaps can best be closed.**

The demand for vegan and vegetarian food, including alternatives to meat, milk, or eggs, has increased significantly in Europe in recent years: The market for these "plant-based foods" is booming and there is no end in sight to this growth trend.

"The term 'plant-based' refers to all products that are purely plant-based, but which are similar in texture, taste, or appearance to animal foods such as meat, milk, eggs, or other products and are intended to replace them," explained Dr. Beate Gebhardt from the University of Hohenheim's Department of Agricultural Markets, head of the qualitative sub-study.

These include milk alternatives such as oat drinks and other plant-based drinks or meat alternatives such as soya "meat" strips and burger patties. "However, unprocessed foods or foods that have only been minimally processed such as bananas, apples, or vegetables are not included. Unfortunately, a clear distinction is often not made here," stated Dr. Gebhardt.

Consumers, on the other hand, also understand "plant-based" to mean independent plant-based foods as well as fruit and vegetables. "Plant-based" often bypasses the term "vegan," with which consumers often have negative associations. The consumer researcher also stresses the importance of differentiating between plant-based nutrition and plant-based foods: "After all, the

motives for choosing one or the other can be very different."

### **Different understanding in the individual EU countries**

"There are also different starting points. For example, in most of the EU countries studied - Germany, Denmark, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland - there are no official definitions of vegan-vegetarian food," said Dr. Gebhardt, summarizing the results of a survey of around 70 people - consumers and experts from industry, science, and research.

This qualitative survey forms the first part of a two-stage consumer study: In the project "The V-Place," an international consortium of industry and research institutions is, among other things, investigating the attitudes and information needs of consumers in six European countries regarding plant-based foods.

"The different conditions in the individual countries lead to a mixture of terms and different understandings of what these mean," Dr. Gebhardt continued. "In Germany, for example, flexitarians who have largely restricted their meat consumption tend to describe themselves as 'vegetarians,' whereas in Italy they usually classify themselves as 'omnivores,'"

"Even within a country there are differences," Dr. Gebhardt stated. "In Germany, for example, flexitarians are often defined as 'people with active reduction of meat consumption' or 'with seldom meat consumption,' but sometimes also as 'part-time vegetarians.' These different definitions can then lead to very different figures: Depending on the definition, market research institute, and research method, the proportion of flexitarians in Germany is between 9 and 55 percent."

### **Flexitarians are difficult to grasp as a target group and often do not feel addressed**

Likewise, the motives of this unclearly defined group vary considerably when it comes to why they choose this form of nutrition. The same applies to decisions on the type and quantity of consumption of animal or plant-based products. Dr. Gebhardt explained this using the example of health: "Those who do without or reduce the amount of animal-based food often want to promote their health. This motive cannot be easily reversed: No health benefit is therefore expected from the more frequent consumption of plant-based substitutes. This applies above all to vegans or vegetarians, but less so to flexitarians," said Dr. Gebhardt.

Flexitarians are a highly interesting target group for plant-based foods, as they are expected to have a high growth potential. According to the findings of the expert interviews, however, they have so far been addressed too little or not adequately. One reason may be that this group is particularly elusive and communication has so far been mainly directed at vegetarians and vegans.

In order to be able to describe them in more detail, the subsequent quantitative survey of "The V-Place" will therefore take a closer look at flexitarians in the six European countries.

### **Diverse reasons for deciding for or against plant-based foods**

But what are the reasons for consumers to decide for or against plant-based foods? "General health, animal welfare, environmental, and climate protection are important motives for the consumption of plant-based foods in all countries under consideration, but they are not the only ones," said Dr. Gebhardt.

Other motives also play a role, such as food intolerance or the desire for weight loss, slower aging, or a better skin appearance. "The desire for 'well-being' is also interesting," stated Dr. Gebhardt. "People are increasingly trying to maintain a sustainable lifestyle, follow recommendations from friends, influencers and brand messages or simply want to try out new things in nutrition - perhaps also to have a say in the trend towards vegan nutrition."

An unappealing taste, a lack of product range or product variety, and too expensive a price are often cited as reasons for not buying plant-based foods. Sometimes there is also a lack of knowledge about how certain, sometimes very unique products should be prepared.

There is a striking concern that plant-based foods undergo too much processing and have too many additives. Especially in the case of meat alternatives that try to imitate the original, experts from the companies surveyed confirm this as justified. Misleading or untrustworthy communication is also cited as a barrier - according to the results of the previous consumer survey.

### **Future of plant-based food: More, better, more diverse and consumer-oriented**

In the meantime, plant-based foods can be found in all countries, especially in supermarkets and discount stores, and to some extent also in organic supermarkets or in specialized online shops. Most of these are made up of dairy and meat products, both in the animal and vegetable variants.

The range of vegetable milk alternatives is described by the experts in all countries as particularly diverse. Milk drinks are offered most frequently and in many varieties. Soya and oat milk are mentioned particularly frequently. Above all, there is a lack of cheese alternatives that are tasty, correspond to the desired variety, from feta to fondue cheese, or that are offered in the familiar supermarket.

The variety of vegetable meat alternatives, on the other hand, is classified by experts as medium to low. Products include mostly burger patties and sliced meat and sausages. However, there is a general lack of diversity, for example in sausages, fresh "meat," ham, or country-specific recipes for alternative products. Fish and egg alternatives are also lacking.

In all countries, consumers want more culinary diversity and better availability of plant-based foods. The experts surveyed also expect many improvements and changes in the future. In addition to a stronger focus on organic and regional products, this includes a significant improvement in sensory and taste quality and a greater variety - both in terms of ingredients and finished products. Besides more imitation products, more independent new plant-based foods are to be launched on the market, with much greater emphasis on sustainability and health aspects.

### **Plant-based foods in Europe need targeted communication**

Overall, the results of the qualitative survey indicate a high and varied need for basic and practical information on plant-based foods. "We need more; more credible and 'right' - in the sense of target-group specific - information from the right sources," Dr. Gebhardt stated.

Consumers are increasingly questioning the health benefits of plant-based foods and are debating whether and to what extent a vegan diet is beneficial or harmful to health. In addition to

scientifically sound information, information on the sensory properties of the products, their preparation and availability, and on environmental aspects are also in demand.

This is where "The V-Place" comes in: "We want to bring this type of nutrition closer to the population in Europe - with solid information that can be understood by everyone," explained the project leader, Klaus Hadwiger from the Research Center for Bioeconomy at the University of Hohenheim. "There are still many misconceptions about plant-based nutrition. We would like to change that."

The survey has shown that credible sources of information are primarily governmental or scientific institutions. Only to a limited extent are vegan or vegetarian organizations alone considered suitable channels for an objective discussion of the topic. And consumers want to receive information where they already are: Online, on social media, in apps, or at the point of sale, i.e. in the familiar local supermarket or discount store.

## **BACKGROUND: The V-PLACE**

In the communication project "The V-Place - Enabling consumer choice in Vegan or Vegetarian food products," a consortium from science and industry is investigating the decisive factors for purchase decisions regarding plant-based food products in a two-stage European consumer study. It will also identify the information needs of consumers in Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Poland.

The project is accompanied by background articles and social media activities in cooperation with the EIT Food Web platform FoodUnfolded, which is dedicated to providing information and entertainment on the topic of food and nutrition.

Cooperation partners include the universities of Hohenheim, Aarhus, Turin, the companies Danone and Doehler and the non-governmental organization ProVeg International. The Research Center for Bioeconomy works on the University of Hohenheim's profile research topic.

This project is funded by EIT Food, the Food Innovation Community of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT). EIT is an EU institution under Horizon 2020, the EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation.

**Additional information** The V-Place on EIT Food

EIT Food Web platform FoodUnfolded

## **BACKGROUND: EIT Food**

EIT Food (<https://www.eitfood.eu>) is a pan-European initiative of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT, an institution of the European Union) to promote entrepreneurship and innovation in the food sector.

It is committed to making the food system more sustainable, healthier, and more trustworthy. Consumers and the support and transfer of knowledge to small and medium-sized enterprises in Europe play a central role in this.

Members of EIT Food are important players in the international food sector: almost 100 partners from leading companies, research institutions, small and medium-sized enterprises, and universities from 13 countries.

### **BACKGROUND: Research Center Bioeconomy at the University of Hohenheim**

The challenges for Bioeconomy are complex and heavily dependent on research efforts. Answers can only be found if researchers work in interdisciplinary projects with other subject areas.

The task of the Research Center for Bioeconomy is to establish this interdisciplinary topic at the university in a targeted and sustainable manner and to implement it by successfully obtaining funding. To this end, it supports researchers across faculties in the application process and/or management of national and international collaborative projects, coordinates international network projects and platforms and plays a major role in the search for possible project partners, the composition of the consortium, and in the development of the project idea, the application letter, communication, and coordination with the funding organization.

### **BACKGROUND: Working Group BEST at the Department of Agricultural Markets**

The Business Excellence and Sustainability Transformation (BEST) working group at the University of Hohenheim's Department of Agricultural Markets is a new initiative. It deals in a practice-oriented manner with the excellence of companies and the appropriate assessment and communication tools that can contribute to sustainable development. In addition, communication and labelling for high-quality food, specificities and sustainability of agricultural and food markets as well as expectations and behavior of stakeholders in the food sector are analyzed. In order to give more visibility to stakeholder orientation or outstanding approaches, opportunities are explored and new approaches developed in a dialogue and continual exchange between science and practice.

### **BACKGROUND: Science Year 2020/21 – Bioeconomy**

In 2020 and 2021, the Science Year will be dominated by the bioeconomy - and thus by a sustainable, biobased economy. The aim is to use natural materials and resources in a sustainable and innovative way, replacing fossil and mineral raw materials, manufacturing products in a more environmentally friendly way, and conserving biological resources. This is more necessary than ever in times of climate change, a growing world population, and a drastic decline in species. The Bioeconomy Science Year, organized by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), shines a spotlight on the topic.

Bioeconomy is the leading topic at the University of Hohenheim in research and teaching. It links the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, the Faculty of Natural Sciences, and the Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Sciences. During the Science Year on Bioeconomy, the University of Hohenheim is hosting many events to inform the public and experts on the topic.

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