Mainstream brands and start-ups alike are introducing plant-based—and soon, cultured meat—alternatives, targeting not only vegetarians and vegans, but meat-eaters.

This month, Los Angeles-based Beyond Meat said its Beyond Burgers will soon hit shelves at China’s Hema supermarkets, also known as Freshippo. The chain of smart supermarkets owned by Alibaba is known for pioneering a seamless online and offline experience, offering everything from tanks of live fish to in-store dining to contactless payment and home delivery.

Starbucks Ominipork Vietnamese noodle salad
In April 2020, Beyond Meat’s beef substitute began showing up in pastas and wraps at Starbucks China outlets. Starbucks also added a Vietnamese noodle salad sprinkled with pork substitute Omnipork, as well as oatmilk by Swedish brand Oatly to its beverage line-up.

Meanwhile, KFC has piloted faux chicken nuggets—made of soy, wheat and pea protein—in the trend-setting cities of Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

While these are part of global efforts by the food giants to expand plant-based menus around the world, they’re notable because meat consumption has been rising steadily in China and the rest of Asia in recent years, correlated with rising incomes.

Though per capita Chinese meat consumption still lags behind Western countries, the size of the Chinese meat market was $155 billion in 2019—almost double that of the US, and up from $145 billion in 2015, according to Euromonitor.
But meat alternatives are gaining ground, too. China consumed $9.6 billion worth of meat alternatives in 2019, up from $7.1 billion in 2015. Across Asia Pacific, the market for meat substitutes was $15.3 billion in 2019, up from $12.9 billion in 2015.

Health and ethics

Asia is home to Indian vegetarian cuisine and the mock meat staples of Buddhist temple cooking. But as societies grow wealthier, people are consuming more meat, raising questions about the toll of animal farming on the planet’s resources. Young people in particular say they are rethinking what they put in their bodies for health and ethical reasons.

In a survey of 4,500 teens and young adults in nine Asian markets by Wunderman Thompson Intelligence last year, 56% of respondents said they have been trying to eat less meat, 70% said they pay attention to food labels and 60% said they try to only eat foods with natural ingredients.
Now Covid-19 is the latest catalyst. “The alternative protein sector is the one that saw growth during the pandemic, both in China and in the US,” Elaine Siu, managing director of the Good Food Institute Asia Pacific, told Wunderman Thompson Intelligence.

“It is likely to continue to do well in 2020 and beyond because it is a lot less vulnerable to supply chain disruption and perishability. Consumers’ interests in alternative protein products have also grown during this time as they become more health conscious and driven by crisis resilience.”
When China’s first food tech accelerator, Bits x Bites, held its first China Food Tech summit in Shanghai in late 2018, it drew an eclectic group of vegan evangelists, chickpea and algae protein proponents and lab-cultured meat scientists, along with circling venture capitalists.

Since then, the community has grown big enough that the APAC chapter of the Good Food Institute last month [June] announced its inaugural Asia Alt 100, listing “Asia’s top 100 protein disruptors of the year.” They include producers, products, investors and R&D players.

“Protein substitutes are already going mainstream and we see this as an inevitable outcome due to the inherent issues in traditional animal agriculture including conversion inefficiency, environmental impact, and public health,” said Siu. “We also see increasing interest from corporates in creating products that are tailored to the variety of Asian palates and cultures.”

The Asia Alt 100 start-ups will be competing with the world’s biggest food producers in this space.

Charoen Pokphand Foods, Thailand’s biggest agribusiness and a major seafood and pork exporter, has said it will introduce plant-based meat substitutes this year to cater to a growing band of “flexitarians” who eschew meat one or more times a week.

Meanwhile, Nestlé—the world’s largest food and beverage company—said in May it would pump $103.6 million into expanding its facilities in Tianjin Economic-Technological Development Area in northeast China to produce plant-based foods.

**The Asian palate**

To go mainstream, meat alternatives need to be compatible with traditional Asian cooking. That’s top of mind for the new batch of start-ups on the scene.
Beijing-based start-up Zhenmeat recently launched its plant-based products that can be used for Chinese cuisine such as hotpot and dim-sum. Made from plant protein including pea, mushroom, soy and brown rice, they include sausage, steak, mooncakes and meatballs.

Zhenmeat is now working on approximating heme, the patented molecule with iron that makes Impossible Foods’ meat substitutes taste like meat, founder Vince Lu Zhongming told the South China Morning Post.

In Singapore, Shiok Meats is researching lab-cultivated seafood, in part to solve the problem of giant shrimp farms, which destroy mangrove forests and can breed disease. It has raised $7.6 million from US accelerator Y Combinator and others and is building its first manufacturing plant in Singapore.
Shiok Meats siew mai

Besides shrimp—which Shiok has tested in a recipe for the dim sum favorite, siew mai—Shiok is also trying to grow crab and lobster meat using cellular technology in labs. Shiok’s products will be commercially available in a few years, the company said.

The end result of all this is likely more choices for all, not less.

Just as supermarket dairy sections now include soy and almond milk, GFI’s Siu sees a future where the meat aisle will include a choice of plant-based alternatives, cultivated meat such as wagyu, foie gras and fish maw, as well as new foods that blend animal and plant origins, making “our food choices more customizable and diverse.”

Asia goes plant-based

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