

Your Guests' Tastes Are Growing Plant-Based – is Your Hotel Out to Pasture?

By [Ewald Biemans](#) Owner & Chief Executive Officer, Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort | August 29, 2021



Once considered fringe, plant-based dining is now a global movement growing at warp speed. Vegan, vegetarian, flexitarian, whatever the plant-based desire, guest demand for it continues to grow exponentially.

In 2020, plant-based food sales grew [twice as fast as overall food sales](#). Plant-based dining provides proven positive changes for guests, animals, and the environment. As Owner/CEO and founder of Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort in Aruba - the Caribbean's [first and only certified carbon-neutral hotel](#) - I've witnessed first hand many changes over the 33 years of the resort and

more than 50 years in the hotel and restaurant industry.

Some are fads and trends, and other changes create permanence. As society becomes increasingly socially conscious along with health and wellness oriented, plant-based dining and products are here to stay. Hoteliers and restaurateurs who choose to embrace plant-based menu options position themselves, their guests and the planet to benefit.

While omnivores still make up the majority of consumers, tides are changing. The emergence of flexitarians is huge right now with 42 percent of global consumers identifying as these semi-vegetarians. This quickly growing group is taking smaller steps to a more sustainable diet by increasing their plant-based intake and decreasing meat portion sizes or meats altogether for some meals on a consistent basis. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased people's awareness of how their health corresponds to the planet's health. Consumers are seeking more transparency in the supply chain while at the same time seeking more of a story from their dining experience.

How does it affect a hotelier's or restaurateur's bottom line? While vegetables, fruits and grains are generally less expensive than animal proteins, there is a shift in cost centers within the overall F&B budget – even if the end total remains almost the same. Going plant-based is not about cutting costs particularly as the preparation can take longer, rather, people are going plant-based for health, ethical and sustainable reasons.





Elements restaurant of Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort was just named the No. 2 Restaurant for Date Night in the World by Tripadvisor.

No Longer a Sideshow

Plant-based options are no longer sides or in the case of plant-based diners, a combination of side dishes or something chefs have to cobble together for the lone meatless diner in the party. These increasingly creative, bold and delectable entrees are quickly garnering equal appeal alongside traditional superstars such as aged steaks, pork cutlets and sauce-rich chicken breasts.

The key is to give plant-based proteins the same attention as animal-based counterparts. While some restaurants will give up 10 to 15 percent of its menu for plant-based, the driver of success is to give it equal weighting. There are always guests who will try something new and different, particularly those seeking an experience they can share with others. At Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort's Elements restaurant, vegan dining is not merely a fraction of the menu, rather it has a dedicated [full vegan menu](#) in addition to vegetarian, gluten-free and world-cuisine menus.

In fact, Elements' culinary team lead by Director of Food & Beverage and Executive Chef Marc Giesbers created the vegan menu not only for vegans, but as importantly for non-vegans, alike. The intention was to result with a dynamically creative, approachable menu for everybody. Plant-based diners have an equal seat at the table. This concept was the first in Aruba. Today, the island's plant-based dining scene is considered one of the most food-forward in travel and is among the most sought after in the Caribbean.



Vegan BBQ appetizer Arepas with Eggplant "Mechada" is slow-roasted shredded eggplant tossed with BBQ sauce atop vegan butter fried corn patties.

Not Just for Strict Practitioners

Plant-based culture is booming. As many as 6 percent of US consumers are vegan ([a 500 percent increase over 2014](#)) and more than 500,000 people signed up for Veganuary's 2021 challenge – a 25 increase over the year prior. In the UK, vegans increased 40 percent in 2020 as global awareness aided in making the [connection between diseases and meat consumption](#). Germany is leading in the plant-based revolution with 1.3 million identifying as vegan and 8 million as vegetarian. India has long had a more plant-based diet with 20 to 40 percent of its population following it and Vietnam and Jamaica each have 10 percent of their populations practicing only plant-based dining.

While vegetarianism rests around the center, on the other end of the spectrum is the semi-vegetarian, also known as the flexitarian. Much like the rising sober curious crowd, flexitarians opt to consume more plants and less meat. This can be per meal or it can mean consciously opting for meatless meals a few times a week. More than 42 percent of global consumers are flexitarians and this is the group that is actually driving the production of more plant-based foods.

Slow Climate Change

Earth's balance is out of balance. The latest findings in the journal [Nature Communications](#) reveal Earth's energy imbalance removes almost all doubt from human-made climate change. In this NBC News coverage of the study, "researchers studying Earth's absorption of the sun's energy found a less than 1 percent probability that the recent changes occurred naturally." For the climate change non-believers, it really does not get more definitive that climate change is real and it is driven by people.

Everyone knows record-breaking droughts, barely contained wildfires, increasingly active hurricane seasons, and fast-melting polar caps continue to destroy or threaten the lives of millions. However, how does this relate to a menu? Animal products are responsible for 58 percent of all food-generated carbon emissions and [18 percent of all greenhouse emissions](#) – twice the amount of all transportation combined.

Only 2.5 percent of the planet's water is freshwater. With the world's largest human population of more than 7.5 billion people, and three out of 10 people not having access to clean water, the fact that [33 percent of clean water goes to animal agriculture](#) is creating a growing scarcity. Animal agriculture both directly and indirectly draws the most on the world's freshwater supply. [Beef has the highest water footprint of any food](#), needing 900 gallons to produce an 8oz steak. And beef takes six times the amount of water as lentils to produce the same amount of protein. In contrast, vegetables use only 20 gallons of water and grains just 60 gallons to produce half a pound. Animal agriculture is the largest polluter of rivers and streams, even more so than oil in gas in some cases.

People are increasingly aware that animal agriculture has a major role in driving climate change. An analysis of USDA reports reveals that plant-based agriculture grows 512 percent more pounds of food than animal-based agriculture on 69 percent of the mass of land that animal-based agriculture uses. Yet, animal-based agriculture costs \$55.8 billion more than plant farming and is tremendously more destructive to the environment and cruel to animals who endure severely crowded living conditions, abuse and exploitation.



This Healthy Italian Vegan Patties and Marinara Sauce over Pasta plant-based twist on classic comfort food.

Beyond the Plate

At this point, almost every hotel has some type of green initiative. Hopefully, it is far beyond what is considered to be greenwashing. For hoteliers using eco-certifications as guidelines, food preparation and

equipment factor into lowering the property's carbon footprint.

When it comes to food & beverage, in the kitchen, Bucuti & Tara uses induction burners rather than popular gas stoves. [Induction burners deliver 80 to 90 percent](#) of its electromagnetic energy to the food pan. In comparison, gas can convert a mere 38 percent of its energy and electric can only convert 70 percent. The inefficiencies of gas and electric stovetops clearly waste valuable resources and time. Additionally, the heat emitted from open flame or radiation from coils add additional burdens to the hotel's cooling system, drawing more air and driving up costs.

Plant-based dining also makes for easier food waste management. Unconsumed portions or scraps can be composted or provided to local farmers.

Root Cause

There is a continuum of reasons for plant-based dining. For some people, it is their health. For others, it is the environment and the importance of regenerative practices, and for others, it is morally focused on the ethical treatment of animals. Usually one reason will draw in a person and then they will gravitate towards other reasons as well the longer they choose this lifestyle.

No surprise here, Millennials and Gen Zers [lead the way with plant-based eating](#). Surveys reveal [87.5 percent](#) of Generation Z are worried about the environment, [41 percent](#) of Gen Z feel that climate change is the single most important issue facing the planet, and [35 percent](#) of Gen Z want to be meat-free by 2021.

Gen X gravitated towards plant-based often as a desire to provide cleaner eating for their young children. Boomers lean towards plant-based dining [for health benefits](#) such as lower rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and cancer. As they adopt a more plant-based diet, they discover they're feeling better than ever through nutrients derived from better eating.



A "Ranch-free" Steak satiates diners with a heart-healthy lentil patty topped with 'vegetable' gravy and served with a mosaic of vegetables.

Ask for Help

Taste is king – and queen! The key drivers of plant-based dining is that it is healthier for people, much better for the planet and alleviates cruelty to animals, however, people naturally want to enjoy the taste. Save time, save countless hours of menu creation and maybe even avoid disappointing reviews by hiring a professional to help create your plant-based dining experience.

Great consultants have the niche expertise to partner with an F&B team to create dishes that make animal-proteins pale in comparison. Consultants understand the different reasons guests have for desiring plant-based and they can balance a menu to appeal to the spectrum of plant-based diners. They are essential for helping restaurants understand important distinctions within the plant-based crowd.

For instance, while many know vegans are strictly plant-based and avoid dairy products, eggs and even honey, veganism goes beyond a diet and is a lifestyle. Its core ethos of doing no harm extends beyond killing animals for food. It also includes that the supply chain be devoid of harmful practices such as child labor or slavery. A professional plant-based dining consultant will help create dishes that are respectful of each guest's plant-based food desire.

Changing Hearts (literally!) and Minds

Plant-based dining is a perfect complement to a hotel's wellness program. Whether the property simply has a fitness room or offers an integrated, comprehensive program complete with credentialed professionals on staff, continuing to connect guests with wellness is pivotal. There is an increasing demand for healthy dining as people become more in tune with their immune systems, particularly due to the pandemic. With the rise of cardiometabolic diseases, people are seeking healthier dietary choices to avoid or control diabetes and heart disease and even decrease their chances of having cancer.

A study by the National Academy of Sciences revealed substantial [co-benefits to health and climate with dietary changes](#). Transitioning toward more plant-based diets that are in line with standard dietary guidelines could reduce global mortality by 6–10 percent and food-related greenhouse gas emissions by 29–70 percent compared with a reference scenario in 2050.



Elements restaurant culinary team members provide weekly cooking demos so guests can learn how to make plant-based and local cuisine in their own kitchens.

Sourcing That Builds Bonds, Tells Stories

A key principle to plant-based dining is to select ingredients that are natural and organic. Sourcing locally keeps the supply chain shorter resulting in fresher food and a decrease in transportation costs and emissions. A byproduct of this is sourcing locally supports the hotel's local community and creates a bond. Supporting the local economy is excellent for morale. The local farmer takes pride knowing their yields are being prepared professionally and enjoyed in their own backyard. Even non-traditional sources share great stories.

At Bucuti & Tara, even Aruba's youngest farmers, fourth-grade students at a local elementary school who practice growing produce such as mint, are suppliers to Elements' dishes such as the heavily plant-based Authentic Aruban & Caribbean Menu. Additionally, if hiring a consultant, they will also help tell the story throughout the menu.

Bottom Line

Sides – vegetables and starches – have long had their place as the less expensive filler on the plate. While traditionally less expensive than the animal-protein headliner of the entree, building out a plant-based menu does not mean profit margins drastically increase. Plant-based dining in general is not intended to cut corners.

Afterall, cutting corners such as upsized portions was a key driver of bigger profits, but ultimately bigger waistlines, more health issues and a deteriorating environment.

Profit margins vary from state to state and country to country depending on labor costs, transportation costs, wholesale costs and/or farm-to-table costs. Vegan food products can command premium prices. Preparing plant-based dishes [can be more labor intensive](#) than traditionally grilling a steak. While raw food costs may not be quite as high as trimmed meat, labor from preparing plant-based dishes is a cost driver from the washing, peeling, chopping, before any of the actual preparation takes place. So, when building out a dining program with more plant-based options, it is just as important to account for this shift as it is in sourcing ingredients for the new, sure-to-be popular plant-based dishes.

It has never been easier or more affordable in the modern world than now to provide plant-based dining. A creative knowledge base, expertise and a growing demand that creates cost efficiencies is making delicious, satiating plant-based food accessible for the masses. From the popular Impossible Burger at Burger King and future McPlant line from McDonald's to the recent news that the esteemed [2021 Met Gala menu will be 100 percent plant-based](#) (yes, they actually eat at high fashion's hottest event of the year!), the world is adapting.

Tripadvisor Goes Vegan

As hoteliers, there's no denying the impact of the world's largest travel review site – Tripadvisor. For 2021, the platform unveiled one of its newest categories, the [Travelers' Choice Award for Best Vegan Spots](#). Whether world-ranked or regionally ranked, diners want to know both where the best plant-based options are located as much as where their lifestyle choice is welcomed.

Sites like Tripadvisor include vegan and vegetarian in search options along with Yelp, Open Table and Google. Hotels and restaurants should be sure their listings are updated to reflect they have plant-based offerings so they show up in searches.

Universal Language

Plant-based dining is a global movement transcending boundaries, races, ethnicities and income. Communicating plant-based options is as easy as introducing new such menus or menu options in hotel newsletters, on the website and pre-arrival emails. Join the social media celebration of #MeatlessMondays and spotlight the story – and people - behind a plant-based dish. Plant-based is an opportunity to stay at the front of consumer desires. The bottom line is that going plant-based is a smart business move.



Mr. Biemans

Ewald Biemans is owner and CEO of Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort in Aruba. A noted environmentalist, Mr. Biemans has steadfastly led the Eagle Beach property to become the Caribbean's first carbon neutral hotel. Averaging a 97 percent year-round occupancy, the property is a testament that sustainability and a memorable vacation can be mutually inclusive. As the most eco-certified Caribbean resort it has achieved CarbonNeutral® certification, LEED Gold, Green Globe Platinum and Travelife Gold. It is the first hotel to receive the coveted Global UN 2020 Climate Action Award for Climate Neutral Now. In 2019 it was the first-ever winner of the World Travel & Tourism Council's Tourism for Tomorrow Climate Action Award. Mr. Biemans has simultaneously led Bucuti & Tara to become the No. 1 Hotel for Romance – Caribbean and Top 10 Hotel for Romance in the World per Tripadvisor. He is a frequent guest speaker and panelist throughout the world most recently at the World Travel & Tourism Global Summit 2021. His goal is to be a resource for other hoteliers to replicate sustainability initiatives throughout their properties.

[Extended Biography & Contact Information](#)

HotelExecutive retains the copyright to the articles published in the Hotel Business Review. Articles cannot be republished without prior written consent by HotelExecutive.

[Share this article with your industry colleagues](#)