



PLANTING MISCONCEPTIONS

Many so-called plant based alternatives to meat and dairy products are failing to deliver on taste, promise, price and, most importantly, nutrition.

By Seedlab Australia co-founder and CEO Dr Hazel MacTavish-West.

Over the next decade, the global plant based food market is predicted to triple in size, with plant based food sales forecast to surge by more than 12 per cent. However, for some experts, the increase in sales of highly manufactured alternatives to animal based products has raised some concerns.

Human cells and bodies need and crave the basic nutritional building blocks: vitamins, minerals, salts, protein, sugars, fibre, fats ... the list goes on. The reality is that some highly manufactured products presented as alternatives to meat and dairy products are masquerading as real foods, and aren't providing the nutrition our bodies require, or the wow factor that our taste buds expect, and may not be worth the higher price point they command.

The influence of large food brands on the plant based market has led many companies to switch from incorporating mushrooms, nuts, legumes and vegetables as ingredients in meat alternatives, to now more frequently utilising highly scientific food technology processes in their production of plant based alternatives that look and attempt to taste like meat and dairy. However, the final products may or may not contain any wholefoods or comparative nutritional value at all.

Many plant based alternatives are now a blend of extracts, isolated food components and other single chemical ingredients.

Recent stories emerging about the global plant based food sector include the plateau of plant based meat sales in the US, which is predicted to soon play out in the Australian market, UK meat brand Heck reducing its alternative

range from 15 to two products, and v2food closing its Wodonga, Victoria plant.

In a 2022 study into sensory expectations around plant based burgers and cheese alternatives, Kerry Group, promoted as global R&D, consumer insights, food safety and manufacturing experts, found that 60 per cent of surveyed Australian consumers had begun eating plant based products as they were considered 'healthier' than the alternative, while 51 per cent were consuming these products for positive environmental impacts.

Outside of vegetarian and vegan communities, consumers are buying these products for novelty reasons, or because of enticing branding and packaging that positions the product as being 'better for you', or because social media made them trendy, or because they were on special.

The emergence of plant based meat alternatives initially presented an opportunity to address nutritional, ethical and environmental issues in a unique and impactful way, by incorporating wholefoods, including nuts, mushrooms, legumes and vegetables, into these products in quantities greater than we'd seen previously.

The conundrum comes when the only alternatives for people who choose not to consume animal derived meat and dairy products for whatever reason are those made from extracts, concentrates, isolates, thickeners, sugar, oils and dextrose with a percentage of mushroom, pea and rice protein and potato starch. Even labelling such products 'plant based' is a bit of a stretch. 'Non-animal derived' may be more accurate.

Just because something has a slight

resemblance to the look and texture of meat or cheese doesn't mean it delivers the same nutrients that the human body needs.

I believe we need to continue to support and encourage producers and food manufacturers to look for sustainably produced, nutritious ingredients including wholefoods that deliver holistically on taste, nutrition, economics and environmental responsibility.

To learn more about Dr Hazel MacTavish-West and Seedlab Australia, visit seedlabaustralia.com.au.

About Dr. Hazel MacTavish-West



Dr Hazel MacTavish-West is the CEO and co-founder of Seedlab Australia, the country's first FMCG-only business incubator and accelerator program for Australian and New Zealand producers of value-added food, non-alcoholic drinks, and sustainably produced personal and home care products. With a career spanning more than 25 years, Hazel has a BSc in agriculture and agricultural chemistry and PhD in plant biochemistry.

About Seedlab Australia

Seedlab Australia is a unique national incubator and accelerator program for Australian and New Zealand producers of value added food, non-alcoholic drinks, and sustainably produced personal and home care products. The team draws from more than 150 years of collective business experience and team leadership and is made up of industry leaders who are passionate about helping businesses make their dreams real.

