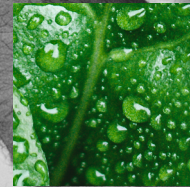
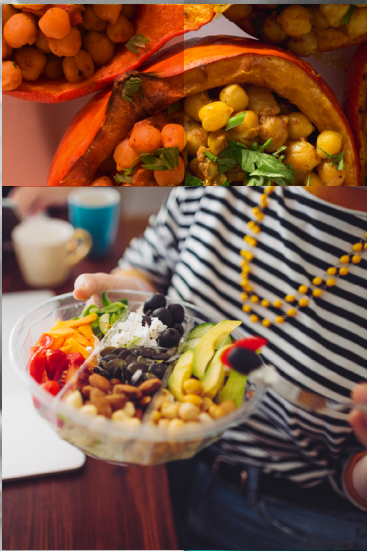


What Motivates Gen Z to Go Plant-Based?



Contents

Gen Z and the Plant-Based Foods Trend.....	2
#1: They're a Climate-Anxious Generation (with Good Reason!).....	3
#2: They Associate Plant-Based Foods with a Health-Conscious Lifestyle.....	4
#3: They're Flavor Connoisseurs with Diverse Palates.....	5
#4: They Have Far More Access to Plant-Based Foods.....	6
Food for the Future.....	7

Gen Z and the Plant-Based Foods Trend



Born between the mid-1990s and the 2010s, Generation Z is set to become the most educated and racially and ethnically diverse generation in U.S. history¹. Food and tech are central to self for this cohort. Unlike older generations, they consider new technologies “[extensions](#)” of themselves and food is a [key part](#) of their personalities. Gen Z is also known to purchase with purpose — the generation makes up a staggering 40% of all U.S. consumers,² and young people are tapping into this unprecedented buying power by backing brands and products that align with their values.

The recent boom in the plant-based foods market, set to continue growing through 2024, has been driven almost entirely by Gen Zers and Millennials.³ But young consumers aren't necessarily looking to give up meat altogether; rather, they're looking for ways to expand and diversify their diets.

Gen Zers are, in fact, the highest daily consumers of animal proteins.⁴ However, the cohort is also decidedly adventurous when it comes to food, consuming a greater amount of plant proteins — products like tofu, tempeh and seitan — than Gen X and Boomers.⁵ And the highest proportion of “meat limiters” — consumers who eat vegan, pescatarian or flexitarian diets — are Gen Zers: more than a third of the generation (36%) limits meat consumption in some way.⁶

While Gen Zers aren't quite ready to do away with their burgers or hot dogs, the majority (65%) find plant-based cuisine appealing,⁷ and more than a third (36%) say they consume meat-alternatives daily.⁸ To ensure we stay a step ahead of the trend, Sodexo set out to study what makes this cohort so ready and willing to try plant-based foods.

Read on to find out what's drawing young Gen Z to plant-based eating.

#1: They're a Climate-Anxious Generation (with Good Reason!)

77% of Gen Zers identify environmental sustainability as a core value, and 57% of them believe that plant-based foods are better for the environment than animal-based products.⁹



Recently branded “the sustainability generation,” Gen Z has come to be associated with all things climate-oriented. The title is no misnomer — Gen Zers are deeply concerned about the global climate crisis, more so than any of their predecessors. According to a [survey](#) commissioned by Impossible Foods, a staggering 77% of the generation identifies environmental sustainability as a core value.

Why are young people so climate-focused? Simply put, they have the most to lose.

Gen Zers have grown up in a world where extreme weather events and climate disasters are increasingly the norm rather than the exception. And digital spaces have accelerated the speed and scale at which youth are bombarded with news about climate change. Endless cycles of stories about droughts, fires, heatwaves and severe storms have shaped a generation racked with eco-anxiety — a condition the American Psychological Association defines as “a chronic fear of environmental doom.”¹⁰

The solution? Action.

More and more young people are turning toward plant-based and plant-forward eating practices as a way to take tangible action — however small — against the overwhelming sense of helplessness they feel over the state of our planet. More than half of Gen Zers (57%) feel that plant-based foods are better for the environment than animal-based products.¹¹ And they're not wrong — studies show that animal-based food production accounts for a whopping 57% of all food production-related greenhouse gas emissions. Plant-based food production, by contrast, accounts for a mere 27%.¹²

According to a recent survey, sustainability was also selected by Gen Z as a top reason for feeling optimistic toward plant-based alternatives — amongst older generations, sustainability was either a low priority or not considered at all.² As Gen Zers increasingly look to food as a pivotal tool to help mitigate the climate crisis, they will continue to champion climate-conscious foods and ethical eating choices, urging industries and organizations to follow suit.

[Learn more](#) about how the climate-conscious trend has been driving Sodexo Campus' shift to plant-based menus and food waste reduction.

#2: They Associate Plant-Based Foods with a Health-Conscious Lifestyle

The 2022-23 Sodexo Student Lifestyle Survey finds that almost a quarter (22%) of today's college students define a healthy diet as one that is plant-forward or plant-based.



According to [the latest research](#) from *Cassandra*, the foremost authority on Gen Z and Gen Alpha research and emerging trends, almost half of Gen Zers (47%) say they're prioritizing nutrition when deciding on a food or beverage. But what exactly does nutrition mean to Gen Z? As part of the [2022-23 Sodexo Student Lifestyle Survey](#), we asked today's college students what a healthy diet meant to them. Almost a quarter (22%) defined a healthy diet as one that's either plant-based or plant-forward.



More and more young people are prioritizing plant-forward foods for their health. Today's college students are increasingly conscious of limiting their use of dairy, eggs and meats;¹³ 7 in 10 are aiming to increase their intake of fruits and veggies;¹⁴ and half are trying to increase their intake of nuts, nut butters and beans.¹⁵ And they're seeking out plant-based foods for highly specific health benefits: 43% percent of students feel plant-based foods offer digestive health benefits, and 35% believe plant-based foods afford more energy and stamina for physical health pursuits.¹⁶

Younger generations aren't alone in associating plant-based diets with health benefits — across all generations, health stands out as the single greatest reason to consider shifting to plant-based foods.¹⁷

#3: They're Flavor Connoisseurs with Diverse Palates

Gen Z is already the most racially and ethnically diverse generation — only 52% of today's 6- to 21-year-olds are non-Hispanic whites.¹⁸



As the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in U.S. history, Gen Zers have a penchant for diverse flavors that reflect [global food cultures](#) as well as their own ethnic backgrounds.

Today's young consumers are far more adventurous with their food preferences. They're drawn toward Asian cuisines, ingredients like lentils and chickpeas and global flavors like coconut, ghost pepper and hemp,¹⁹ and their food and beverage purchase decisions are heavily impacted by the opportunity for cultural food exposure.²⁰

Tofu, tempeh, quinoa, lentils — plant-based foods once strictly thought of as “global” ingredients — are standard fare to Gen Z. They've grown up eating these foods in their own homes, at friends' houses and at restaurants. At the very least, they've encountered these foods in supermarkets or on social media.

Given their diverse food IQ and familiarity with plant-derived ingredients, Gen Zers are more willing to explore plant-based cuisines, whereas older generations, less accustomed to such a diverse range of ingredients, remain skeptics. According to a recent survey, almost half (47%) of Gen Zers and Millennials are drawn to plant-forward dishes inspired by world cuisines, more so than the average consumer²¹ — perhaps because the combination affords younger generations the opportunity to discover new cuisines while staying true to climate-conscious values.



#4: They Have Far More Access to Plant-Based Foods

A third (33%) of Gen Zers say they've purchased more plant-based products because plant-based products have become more readily available.



Plant-based foods have exploded across restaurant menus and grocery store aisles. Alongside conventional meatless offerings like plant-based burgers, restaurants are flaunting innovative plant-based dishes and bold flavors like cauliflower wings, kimchi fries, elote and Buddha bowls.²² Even popular fast-food chains like Burger King, KFC, Chipotle and Del Taco have hopped on the consumer trend, featuring plant-based, meat-alternative options in lieu of traditional chicken nuggets and beef patties.

Plant-based foods are everywhere — ask Gen Zers and Millennials. Both cohorts are, in fact, more likely than older generations to believe that plant-forward options are readily available most or at least some of the time.²³ More than 40% of Gen Zers say they've noticed more plant-based products during supermarket visits, while more than a third (33%) say that ready access has actually motivated them to purchase more plant-based products.²⁴

Gen Zers and Millennials are also more likely than older cohorts to feel confident trying plant-based products when they're already familiar with the products' brand,²⁵ indicating that as more brands adopt plant-based foods and meat alternatives, young consumers will grow increasingly comfortable trying plant-based products.



Food for the Future

For young consumers, food is no longer just about taste or price. Gen Zers are considering a far wider range of factors, like environmental impacts, nutrition and food experience — factors that are reshaping the food and beverage industry for all consumers and driving the growth of the plant-based foods market. By championing climate-conscious food behaviors, young people are inspiring institutions, businesses and other organizations to transform alongside them.



As a campus partner and global leader in the food service industry, Sodexo is committed to being part of this change. Globally, our organization is shifting to 33% plant-based planned menus by 2025 while Sodexo Campus in the U.S., in particular, will offer 42% plant-based entrees on planned menus by 2025.

By recognizing how our eating habits impact the planet as well as our health, young consumers are leading by example, showing us how even the smallest of choices can make a world of difference.

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