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Plant-based foods in U.S. foodservice:

Sales data and consumer insights for
plant-based and conventional categories

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2019 – 2023

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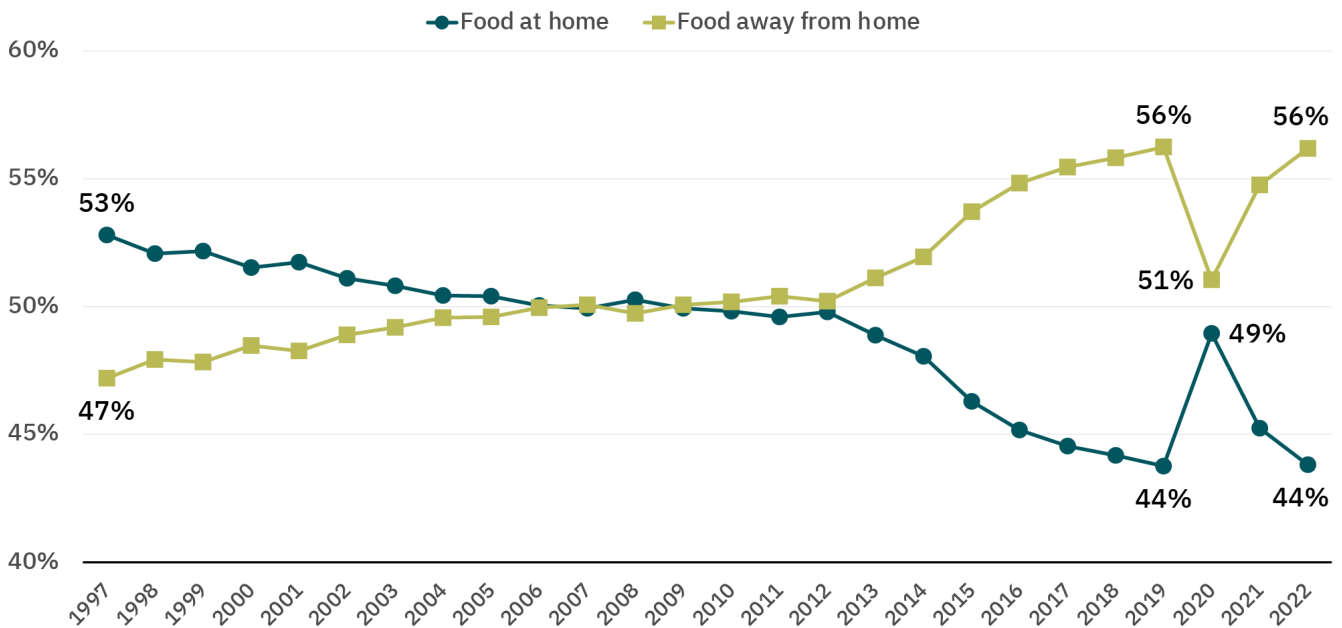
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Introduction and context

Over a decade ago, food expenditures of away-from-home purchases surpassed food-at-home purchases in the United States. The trend of consumers shifting their food spend to foodservice environments continued until 2020 when the Covid-19 pandemic caused individuals to shift a large portion of their spending to retail. The pandemic was an unprecedented event that heavily affected many sectors, including food. Fast forward to 2022 and while away-from-home food purchases

had recovered to pre-pandemic levels, the landscape had, nonetheless, changed dramatically. Over the last four years, the food sector has experienced a host of macroeconomic challenges, namely supply chain disruptions and inflation. Additionally, the consumer landscape has changed in response to higher prices and shifting needs and behaviors. Still, the rebound from 2020's declines seems to indicate that the decades-long trend of an increasing affinity for food experiences away from the home is poised to continue.

Figure 1: U.S. nominal food expenditures 1997-2022



Source: [USDA Food Expenditures Series](#) - nominal food and alcohol expenditures, with taxes and tips, for all purchasers, 6/1/2023

Total food sales

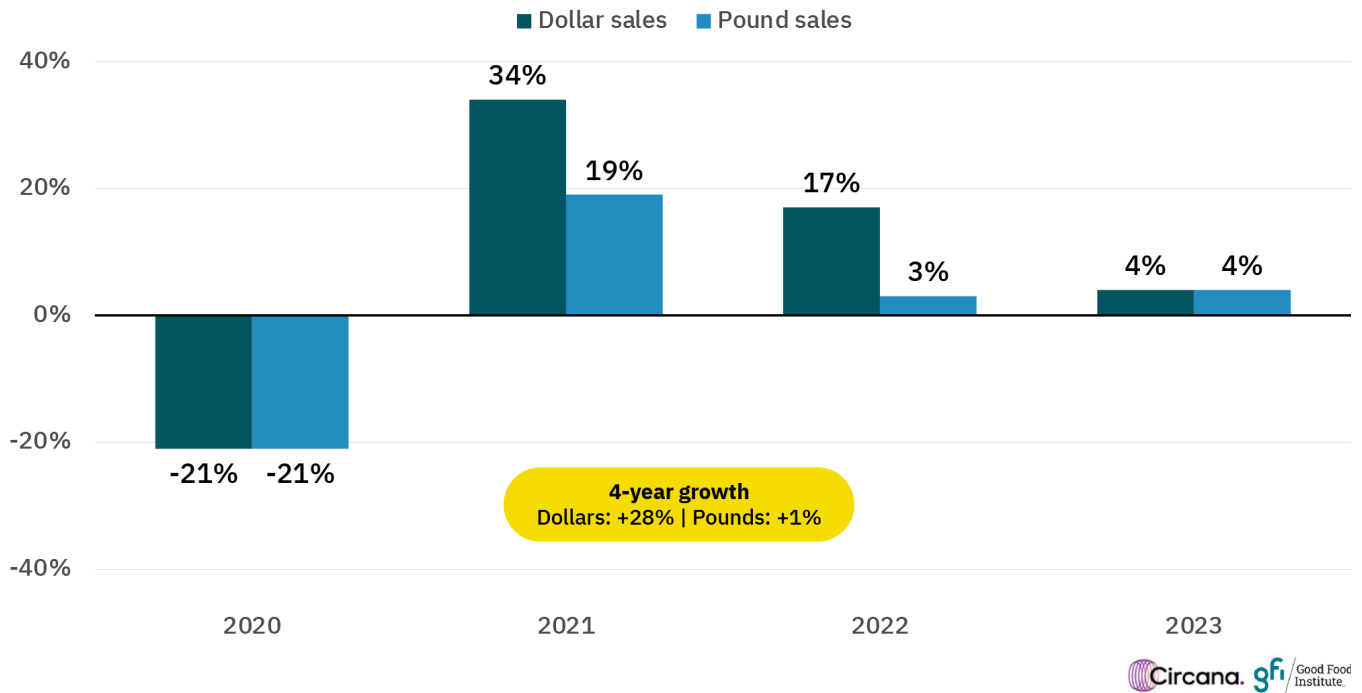
Circana data on **total food operator purchases from broadline distributors**, roughly 41 percent of the total foodservice sector, showed that in 2023, both dollar and pound sales increased 4 percent from 2022, marking the third consecutive year of growth following the significant declines in 2020.

Compared to pre-pandemic levels of 2019, dollar sales have grown 28 percent while pound

sales are just 1 percent above previous highs. Consumer spending has rebounded to match 2019 levels, but overall pound consumption is similar to pre-pandemic levels. This gap between dollar and pound sales growth represents an increase in the average price-per-pound from distributors to operators of 27 percent since 2019. Inflation has had a significant impact on the sector in the last five years.

Figure 2: U.S. broadline distributor sales growth versus the previous year

Total food



Source: Circana/SupplyTrack, Product Class: Total food. Dollar and pound sales are 12 months ending December 2023 vs 4 prior years.

Inflation challenges

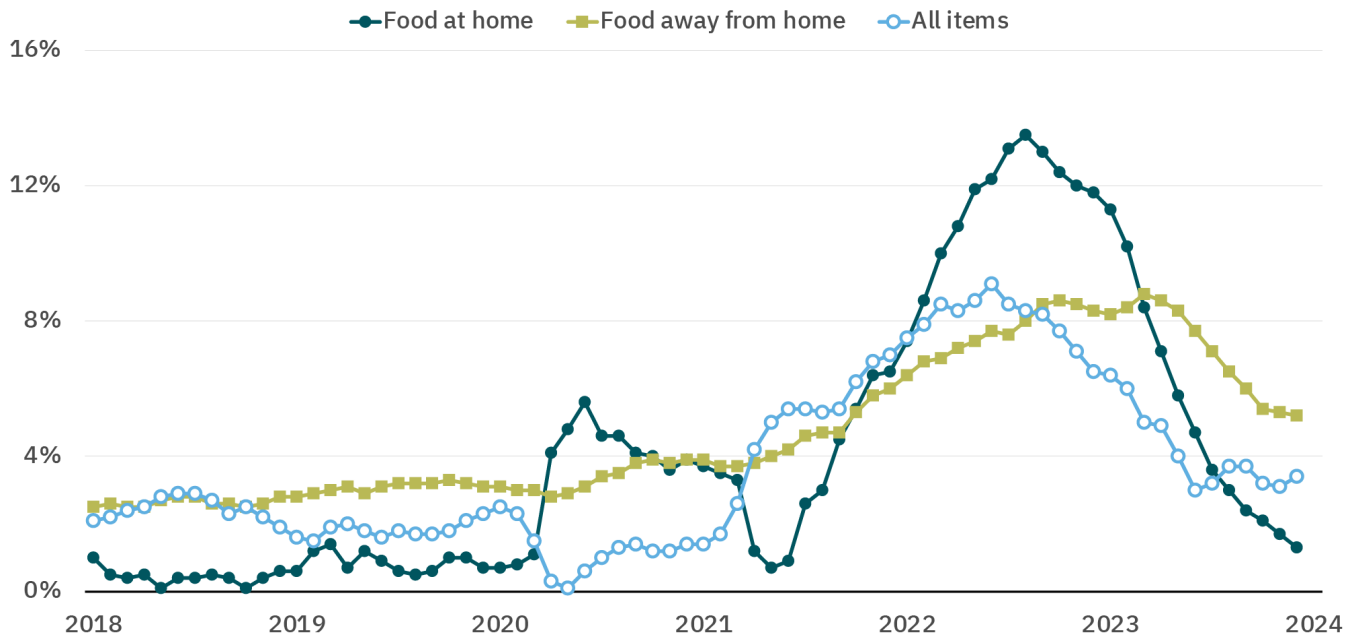
According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in December 2022, food-away-from-home prices were 8 percent higher than the same month in 2021. In December 2023, prices were 5 percent

higher than 2022 levels. This trend of continued price increases has hit the food sector in both the retail and foodservice settings. As a result, consumers were paying 25 percent more on all food in 2023 compared to 2019, an increase that was second to only transportation costs.

For more on the retail sales of plant-based foods in the U.S., visit [GFI's market research webpage](#).

Figure 3: U.S. consumer price index 12-month percentage change

Jan 2018–Dec 2023



Source: [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), 12-month percentage change, Consumer Price Index, Jan 2018 - December 2023

Price increases across food sectors have affected consumer behavior in the foodservice channel. In January 2023, 73 percent of U.S. adults reported noticing that dining at restaurants cost more than it had in the past, and restaurant visits hadn't fully rebounded to 2019 levels, according to [Morning Consult](#).

In the short term, the foodservice sector has faced a host of challenges over the last five years. However, as inflation continues to ease in 2024 and as consumer confidence rises, the sector is poised to continue the decades-long growth trend.

For plant-based categories, namely plant-based proteins, this makes foodservice an appealing channel.

The foodservice opportunity

Foodservice environments can play a key role in delivering a unique, oftentimes first, experience with plant-based products, setting the stage for future encounters. Thus far, categories like plant-based proteins, milk, cheese, and more have secured a meaningful presence in this market, showing up on menus across dining-out experiences. Major chains, local eateries, fine dining restaurants, universities, airlines, and more have leaned into plant-based strategies and opportunities remain as plant-based categories, in particular plant-based proteins, have modest sales compared to their conventional counterparts.

Continuing to expand offerings across large chains and everyday settings such as schools, hospitals, and local favorites while improving product taste, price, variety, and functionality will all be essential in transitioning plant-based categories from niche to norm on menus across the United States.

Figure 4: U.S. broadline distributor foodservice sales by category
2019–2023

Category	2023 dollar sales	1-year dollar sales growth (2022–2023)	4-year dollar sales growth (2019–2023)	2023 pound sales	1-year pound sales growth (2022–2023)	4-year pound sales growth (2019–2023)
Total food	\$117 B	4%	28%	54 B	4%	1%
Plant-based proteins	\$306 MM	-1%	6%	60 MM	-3%	-3%
Analogues	\$196 MM	-6%	20%	30 MM	-8%	24%
Grain/nut/veggie	\$63 MM	-1%	-29%	10 MM	-5%	-44%
Tofu and tempeh	\$44 MM	18%	24%	19 MM	9%	1%
Animal-based meat	\$47 B	-3%	21%	12.6 B	4%	3%
Plant-based cheese	\$30 MM	-3%	26%	7.6 MM	-6%	-9%
Animal-based cheese	\$7.2 B	-1%	18%	2.4 B	4%	3%
Plant-based milk	\$222 MM	21%	81%	159 MM	18%	55%
Animal-based milk	\$928 MM	7%	34%	1.2 B	8%	8%



Source: Circana/SupplyTrack, Product Class: Plant-based proteins (analogous meat alternatives, grain/nut/veggie alternatives, tofu/tempeh), Animal-based meat (poultry, beef, pork, seafood, hot dogs/sausage/specialty meat), Cheese alternatives, Conventional cheese, Milk alternatives, Conventional milk. Dollar and pound sales are 12 months ending December 2023 vs 4 prior years.

Key findings

1 *In U.S. foodservice, plant-based proteins experienced modest pound sales declines while dollar sales remained flat in 2023.*

U.S. broadline distributor dollar sales of plant-based proteins fell modestly to \$306 million in 2023, but remained above 2019 levels. Pound sales have yet to fully recover from pre-pandemic highs. Similarly, in 2023, conventional meat pound sales modestly eclipsed previous highs of 2019 while dollar sales were significantly elevated compared to pre-pandemic levels. The gap between dollar and pound sales growth across categories indicates the impact of price increases in recent years, a broad trend seen across food categories.

2 *Price increases moderated in 2023 but have had a major impact since 2019.*

Price increases eased in 2023 as the average price per pound of plant-based proteins grew modestly and conventional meat prices fell in the last year. Notably, the conventional meat price increases since 2019 have outpaced price increases in plant-based proteins. This means there has been some progress on closing the plant-based price gap: since 2019, when plant-based proteins were 49 percent more expensive than conventional meat on a per-pound basis, the price gap decreased by 11 points to 38 percent. Looking at analog meat alternatives specifically—products like plant-based burgers, nuggets, and sausages—average prices have fallen slightly since 2019. Although price increases appear to be easing, consumers are still paying more for food—plant-based and conventional—than they were in 2019.

3 *Analog plant-based proteins that aim to match the taste and texture of animal-based meat have the majority of sales in the plant protein category.*

In 2023, products such as plant-based beef, chicken, pork, and seafood made up 50 percent of plant-based protein pound sales, up from 39 percent in 2019.

4 *Emerging segments include formats and product types beyond the traditional veggie patty.*

In 2023, the top three emerging segments within the plant-based proteins category were plant-based pork patties, plant-based chicken nuggets, and plant-based chicken tenders. All three segments experienced double-digit pound sales growth in 2023 and have grown dramatically since 2019.

5 *Plant-based milk makes up a meaningful share of the total milk market while plant-based cheese has opportunities to expand.*

In 2023, plant-based milk made up 12 percent of the total milk market pound sales and 19 percent of dollar sales. Plant-based cheese is a relatively small segment at \$30 million in broadline distributor sales but has a long runway of opportunity to compete with the \$7.2 billion conventional cheese category.

6 *Foodservice stakeholders continue to commit to expanding plant-based offerings.*

Major foodservice management companies like Sodexo and Aramark, college universities, hospital networks, and other organizations have made impressive commitments to expand plant-based offerings to their consumers between now and 2030. Commitments such as these, alongside other strategies that make plant-based offerings commonplace on menus, will play an important role in the future success of the sector.

A note on the data: Circana's SupplyTrack tool was used to track roughly 86 percent of all broadline distributor sales directly to operators, accounting for approximately 41 percent of total foodservice sales. The Good Food Institute, in partnership with the Plant Based Foods Association, commissioned the data for plant-based proteins, milk, and cheese, and their conventional counterparts. It is important to note that broadline distributors typically cater to noncommercial operators (such as schools and universities, healthcare systems, and workplaces) and small- to medium-sized chains rather than large chains that often use specialty distributors or their own distribution networks. However, large chains are not absent from this dataset; chains that do leverage broadline distributors are captured. For more on the data methodology, reference the [About the data](#) section below.

01 Plant-based proteins

Category sales

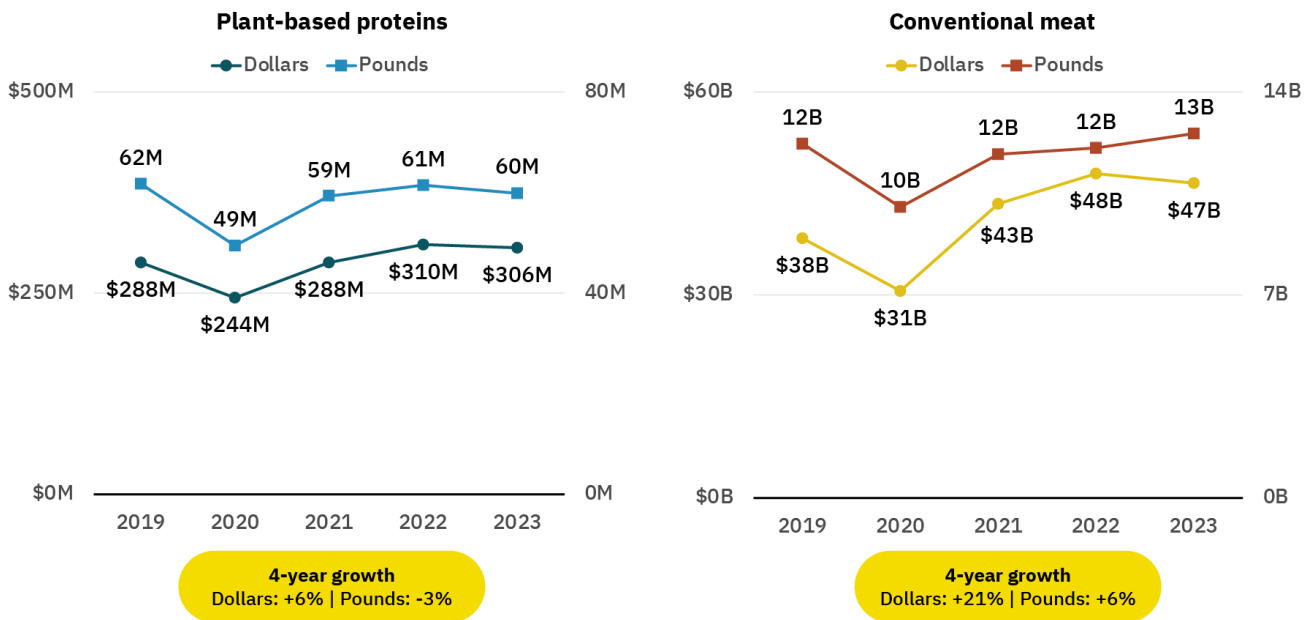
Since 2019, plant-based protein sales, like most foodservice categories, have experienced volatility due to the Covid-19 pandemic, inflation, and other market factors. In 2020, plant-based protein dollar sales declined 15 percent and pound sales declined 20 percent. This, although slightly improved from the total food declines of 21 percent and 21 percent, marked a major disruption.

Since the sales drop in 2020, plant-based proteins in foodservice experienced a significant rebound in

2021 followed by a healthy year of growth in 2022. In 2023, however, dollar sales fell just 1 percent while pound sales declined 3 percent. Over five years, dollar sales have grown 6 percent while pound sales have yet to surpass the previous highs of 2019, and are still down 3 percent.

Conventional meat experienced a similar trajectory with major declines in 2020 and two years of rebounding sales in 2021 and 2022. In 2023, dollar sales fell 3 percent while pound sales grew 4 percent. This represented an average price decline of 7 percent in the last year despite prices being up 18 percent over the full five-year period.

Figure 5: U.S. broadline distributor foodservice sales
Plant-based proteins and conventional meat, 2019–2023



Source: Circana/SupplyTrack, Product Class: Plant-based proteins (analogous meat alternatives, grain/nut/veggie alternatives, tofu/tempeh), Animal-based meat (poultry, beef, pork, seafood, hot dogs/sausage/specialty meat). Dollar and pound sales are 12 months ending December 2023 vs 4 prior years.

Rising prices

Food prices across both retail and foodservice channels have increased significantly since 2019. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's analysis, consumers were paying 25 percent more for food in 2023 compared to 2019. The gap between dollar percentage change from year to year and unit percentage change indicates price increases and decreases. Broadline distributor sales data from Circana shows that conventional meat experienced dollar sales declines in 2023 while pound sales grew. This reflects price decreases versus 2022.

Despite price growth beginning to ease in 2023, operators, and in turn consumers, are impacted and influenced by historically high prices. Since 2019, the average price per pound has increased across all categories tracked in this dataset, albeit at differing rates:

- Total food: +27 percent
- Animal-based meat: +18 percent
- Plant-based proteins: +10 percent
- Animal-based milk: +25 percent
- Plant-based milk: +17 percent
- Animal-based cheese: +14 percent
- Plant-based cheese: +38 percent

Progress on price parity

Notably, within plant-based proteins, analog products or items meant to replicate the taste, texture, and experience of conventional meat have seen overall prices fall 3 percent since 2019.

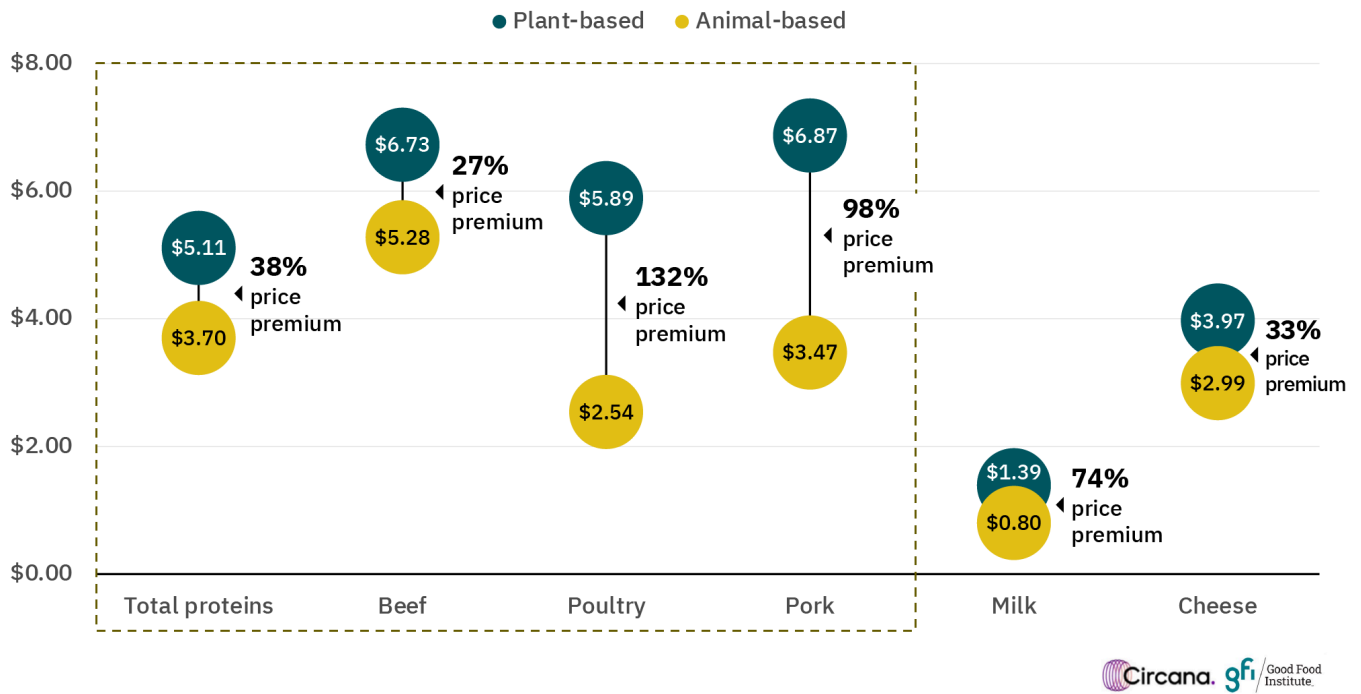
Still, plant-based categories sit at a significant premium to their conventional counterparts when comparing the average prices per pound from broadline distributors to operators. This poses an added challenge for these categories as consumers tighten their budgets during periods of high inflation.

Specifically, the plant-based beef subcategory has seen a 10 percent decrease in average price per pound relative to 2019 levels. Possible reasons for declining prices may include companies achieving increased scale and securing more favorable agreements with distributors as a result. This is an encouraging sign that progress is being made toward closing the price gap in the most mature plant-based meat subcategory.

As inflation eases in 2024, plant-based manufacturers and operator partners should prioritize closing the price gap to drive trial and repeat purchases within these categories.



Figure 6: Plant-based versus animal-based headline distributor price per pound comparison 2023



Source: Circana/SupplyTrack, Product Class: Plant-based proteins (analogous meat alternatives, grain/nut/veggie alternatives, tofu/tempeh), Animal-based meat (poultry, beef, pork, seafood, hot dogs/sausage/specialty meat), Cheese alternatives, Conventional cheese, Milk alternatives, Conventional milk. Dollar and pound sales are 12 months ending December 2023 vs 4 prior years.

Product types, formats, and ingredients

The plant-based proteins category in headline distributor sales has grown significantly in scope and variety since 2019. Nevertheless, significant opportunities remain to further diversify product offerings to better meet consumer needs.

Unsurprisingly, the category is dominated by a few select product types and formats. Altogether, tofu blocks, plant-based beef patties, grain/nut/veggie patties such as bean burgers, and plant-based beef grounds make up more than 60 percent of both dollar and pound sales in the category. Plant-based beef alternatives as a whole lead the category in dollar sales at 39 percent of the total. Tofu represents the greatest share of pound sales among product types at 31 percent.

From a main ingredient perspective, products with the main ingredients of soy and pea protein together represented 70 percent of the category’s pound sales followed by vegetable- and black bean-based items.

Soy protein	57 percent
Pea protein	13 percent
Vegetable	13 percent
Black bean	8 percent
Other	5 percent
Mushroom and mycoprotein	3 percent
Textured vegetable protein	2 percent

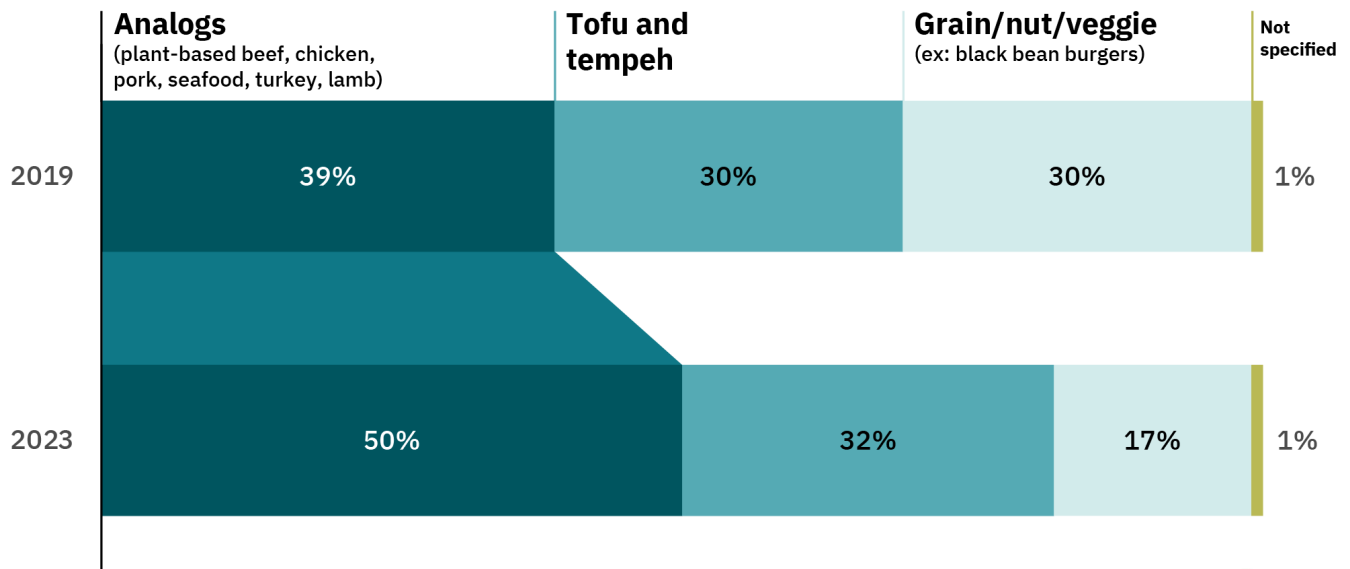
These breakouts highlight the significant opportunities for the category to expand beyond patties, tofu, and tempeh and into new and emerging product types and formats. Additionally, innovation in ingredient types and primary proteins may be important in improving product functionality, taste, price, and health benefits.

Meat analogs vs. non-analogs

Alongside the dramatic sales declines from 2019 to 2020 in total foodservice and plant-based proteins, the category experienced a period of significant innovation and evolution. Specifically, analog products meant to replicate the taste, texture, and experience of conventional meat were flooding the market resulting in analog plant-based proteins growing modestly in both dollar and pound sales in 2020.

These products jumped from just 39 percent of the category’s pound sales in 2019 to 51 percent in 2020, overtaking more vegetable-forward plant-based proteins like tofu and tempeh and grain/nut/veggie items like bean burgers. Fast forward to 2023 and analogs still make up the majority of pound sales in the category.

Figure 7: Share of plant-based protein U.S. broadline distributor foodservice pound sales 2019 vs 2023



Source: Circana/SupplyTrack, Product Class: Plant-based proteins (analogous meat alternatives, grain/nut/veggie alternatives, tofu/tempeh). Dollar and pound sales are 12 months ending December 2023 vs 4 prior years.

Analog: Items that are meant to replicate the taste, texture, and appearance of traditional meat (e.g., Impossible burger, Beyond chicken tenders). This dataset includes plant-based beef, chicken, pork, seafood, turkey, and lamb.

Non-analog: Items with more vegetable-forward ingredients that are not meant to directly replicate the characteristics of animal-based meat. This dataset includes tofu, grain/nut/veggie products (e.g., bean burgers), and tempeh.

Breaking down these segments further, the top analog segments, including plant-based chicken (+78 percent), pork (+45 percent), and beef (+7 percent) have grown in pound sales at the highest rates from 2019 to 2023. Tofu and tempeh have seen pound sales grow modestly (+1 percent) over the same timeframe while grain/nut/veggie items have seen pound sales drop off significantly (-44 percent). In 2023 however, tofu and tempeh saw impressive dollar and pound sales growth while plant-based beef alternative sales declined by double digits.

Within the plant-based proteins category, analogs have emerged as the leader while tofu and tempeh continue to play a meaningful role as key components of dishes and menu items. Grain/nut/veggie products, particularly patties, on the other hand, have fallen from 2019 highs.

The growth of analogous products since 2019 underscores a consumer desire for meat alternatives that match the conventional meat experience. Meanwhile, opportunities exist to better meet consumer needs with these products on key decision points of taste and price.

Emerging plant-based protein segments

Analog meat alternatives have grown to dominate the plant-based proteins category in foodservice, but for the segment and overall category to continue to grow and earn more of the total protein share in foodservice, manufacturers and operators will need to diversify their product offerings.

Three such emerging segments in the plant-based proteins category are analog product types:

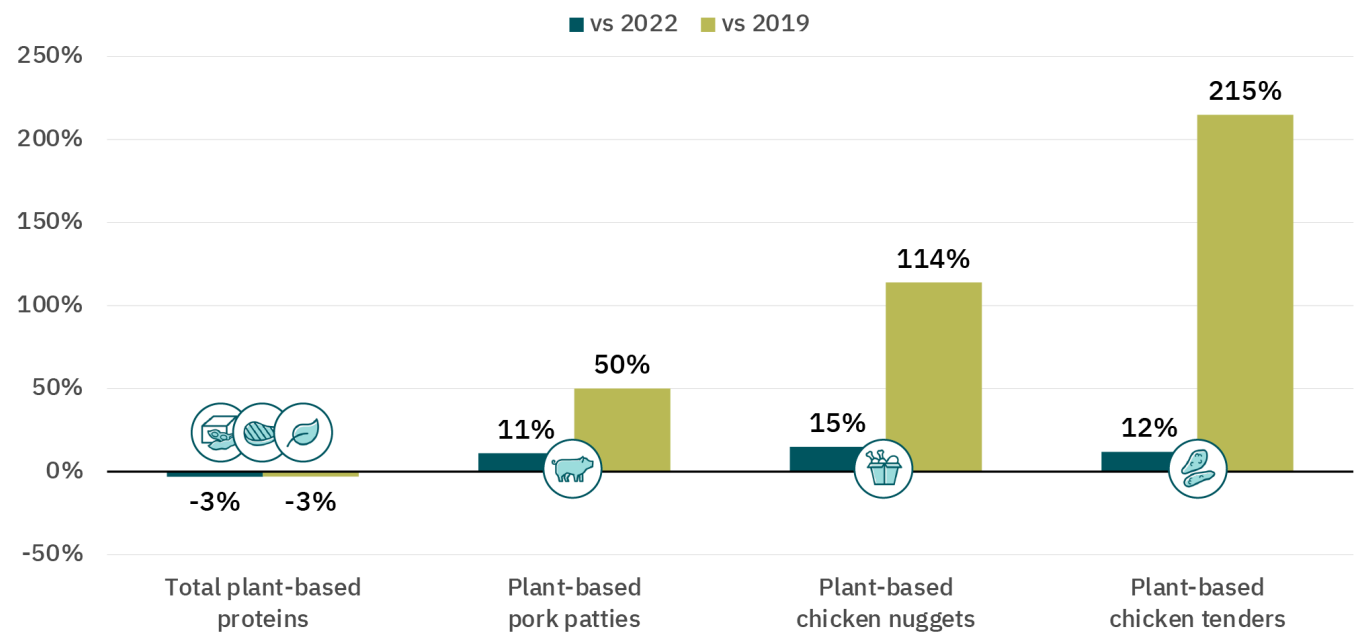
1. Plant-based pork patties.
2. Plant-based chicken nuggets.
3. Plant-based tenders.

Each of these segments experienced double-digit pound and dollar sales growth in 2023 compared to other top formats that experienced pound sales declines or more modest increases. The four-year growth of these segments is even more considerable, albeit off of relatively small bases.

Both manufacturers and foodservice operators are leaning into plant-based protein products that offer an experience similar to conventional meat, diversifying beyond the traditional patty or burger. By adding to their selection of products, companies can cater to a wider group of customers while keeping current purchasers engaged and excited about new menu options.

Figure 8: Emerging plant-based protein segments: broadline distributor pound sales growth

2023



Source: Circana/SupplyTrack, Product Class: Plant-based proteins (analogous meat alternatives, grain/nut/veggie alternatives, tofu/tempeh). Dollar and pound sales are 12 months ending December 2023 vs 4 prior years.

For manufacturers working on product development, reference GFI's [Plant-based meat manufacturing guide](#) and [Plant Protein Primer](#).

Foodservice segments

In 2023, 36 percent of all plant-based protein pound sales from broadline distributors went to quick-service restaurants (QSRs). Behind QSRs, full-service restaurants (FSRs) and educational institutions made up equal shares for an additional 36 percent of the category.

After pandemic-driven pound sales declines of 46 percent in 2020, plant-based protein purchasing from **educational institutions** has surged in the last three years, growing 36 percent from pre-pandemic levels of 2019, and now making up 18 percent of total pound sales.

Tailwinds are strong for plant-based proteins in education: foodservice management companies and universities have made robust commitments to increasing plant-based menu offerings:

- Sodexo has committed to increasing the percentage of plant-based menu items offered at their university partners to 50 percent by 2025.
- Aramark has similarly committed to making its university menus 44 percent plant-based by 2025.
- Kent State University in Ohio announced plans to grow plant-based offerings to 30 percent of menu items by 2026.

- Columbia University committed to reducing food-based emissions by 25 percent by 2030 through signing onto the Plant-Powered Carbon Challenge.
- University of California, Berkeley announced a commitment to having at least 50 percent of entrees served be plant-based by 2027.

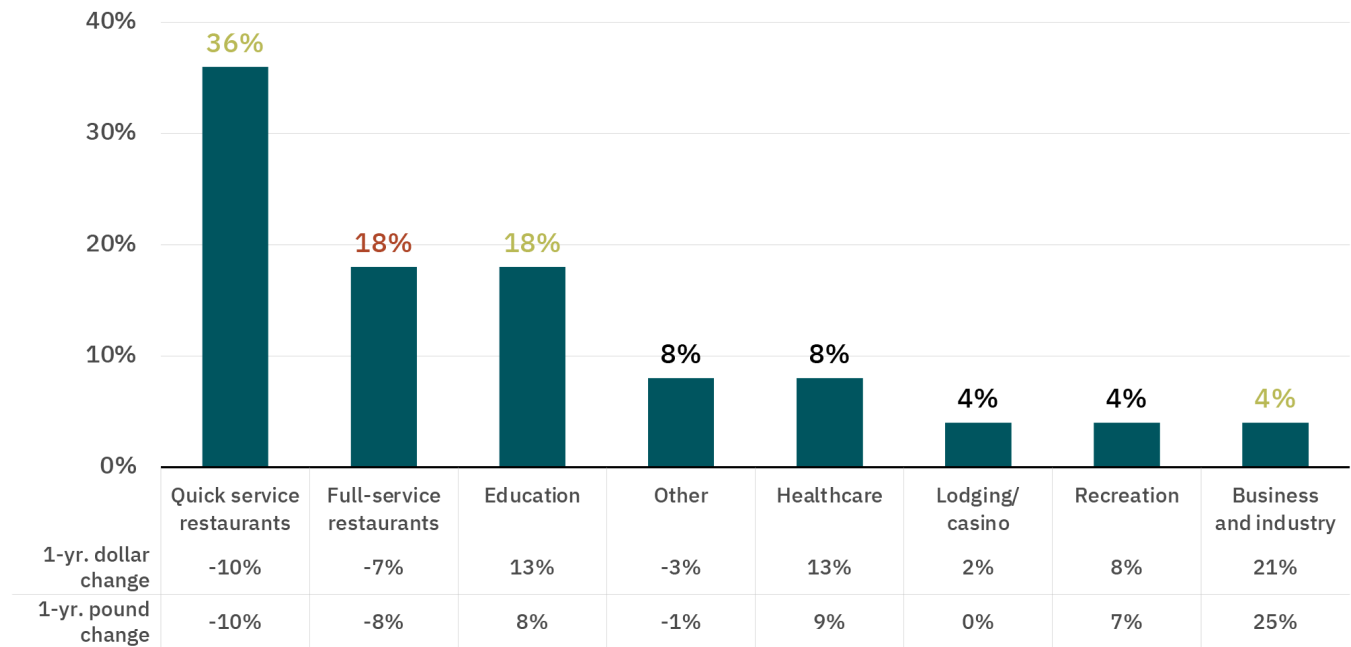
Healthcare is another segment that has seen impressive growth since 2020 declines, with pound sales 12 percent higher than in 2019 after three consecutive years of growth following 2020. One example is NYC Health + Hospitals announcing that primary dinner options would now be plant-based at all 11 public locations.

These commitments from industry leaders and institutions set an example for other foodservice management companies to prioritize plant-based options, which can help them meet their sustainability goals and appeal to a consumer base with a marked interest in plant-based foods.

Significant opportunities exist for manufacturers and operators to expand their plant-based protein offerings in emerging segments like education and healthcare and in larger segments such as QSRs and FSRs.



Figure 9: Operator segment share of total plant-based protein pound sales 2023



Source: Circana/SupplyTrack, Product Class: Plant-based proteins. Dollar and pound sales are 12 months ending December 2023 vs 4 prior years. “Other” includes Other non-commercial, Government, Other retail, Food stores, C-stores, and Not specified.

Note: Green highlighted percentages indicate where plant-based protein sales over-index in that channel relative to total food. Red indicates underindexing. Black indicates that share is within 2 points of the respective total food share.

02 Plant-based milk and cheese

The Good Food Institute (GFI) and Plant Based Foods Association also commissioned, for the first time, broadline distributor sales data for plant-based milk and cheese categories in foodservice.

Plant-based milk

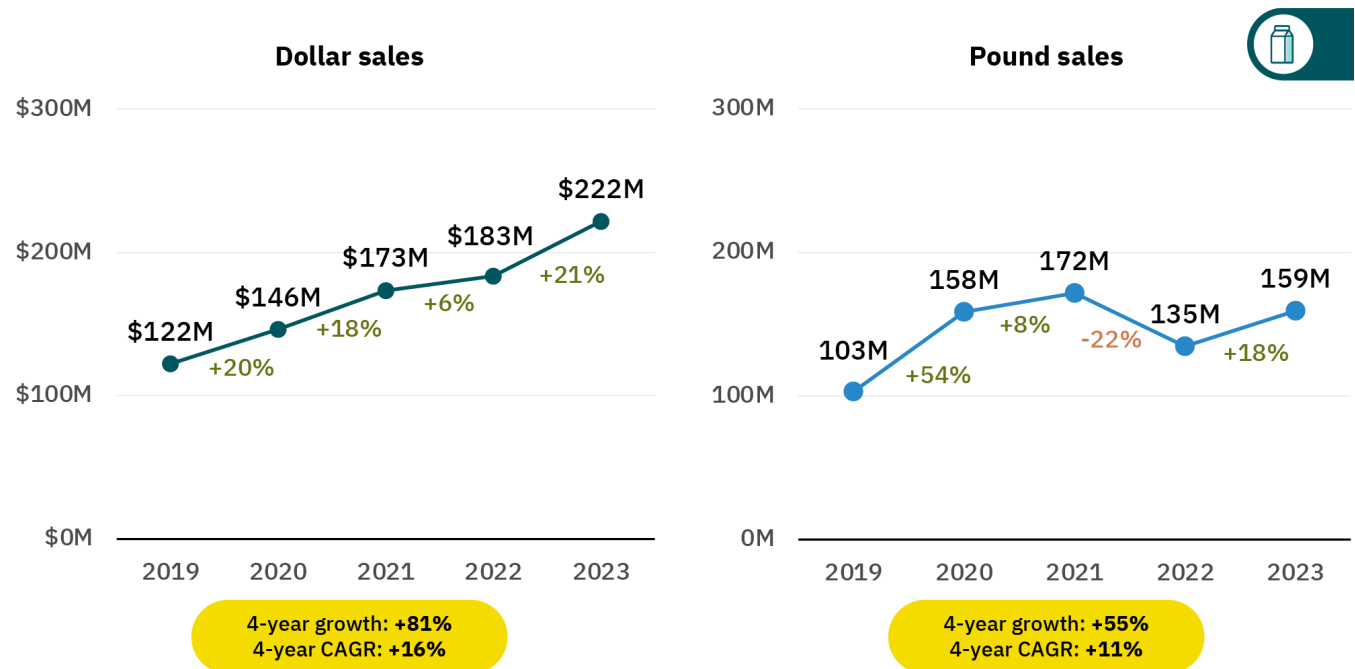
Plant-based milk in this sector reached \$222 million in sales, representing a 19 percent share of dollar sales of the total milk category.

Unlike many food categories, plant-based milk saw sales grow significantly in 2020. The segment has expanded over the last five years with pound sales up 55 percent and dollar sales up 81 percent since 2019. Meanwhile, conventional milk pound sales have increased just 8 percent and dollar sales 34 percent since 2019. This pace of growth was similar to the trajectory of other food categories over the same timeframe.

In both foodservice and retail, plant-based options make up a sizable share of the overall milk market. The category appears to have succeeded in driving mass-market appeal with products that not only fit into key occasions but also deliver on consumers' needs and expectations. One such example includes the use case in coffee. [Mintel's 2023 report](#) found that roughly 1 in 5 Gen Z coffee consumers say their coffee is better with non-dairy milk. Additionally, a [2023 Morning Consult survey](#) found that 55 percent of nondairy milk consumers choose it because of taste and 52 percent because of health.

The versatility of plant-based milk and its ability to deliver on top purchase motivators are key to its success across channels, making it an important example of success in the plant-based sector.

Figure 10: U.S. broadline distributor foodservice sales
Plant-based milk market, 2019–2023



Source: Circana/SupplyTrack, Product Class: Milk alternatives. Dollar and pound sales are 12 months ending December 2023 vs 4 prior years.

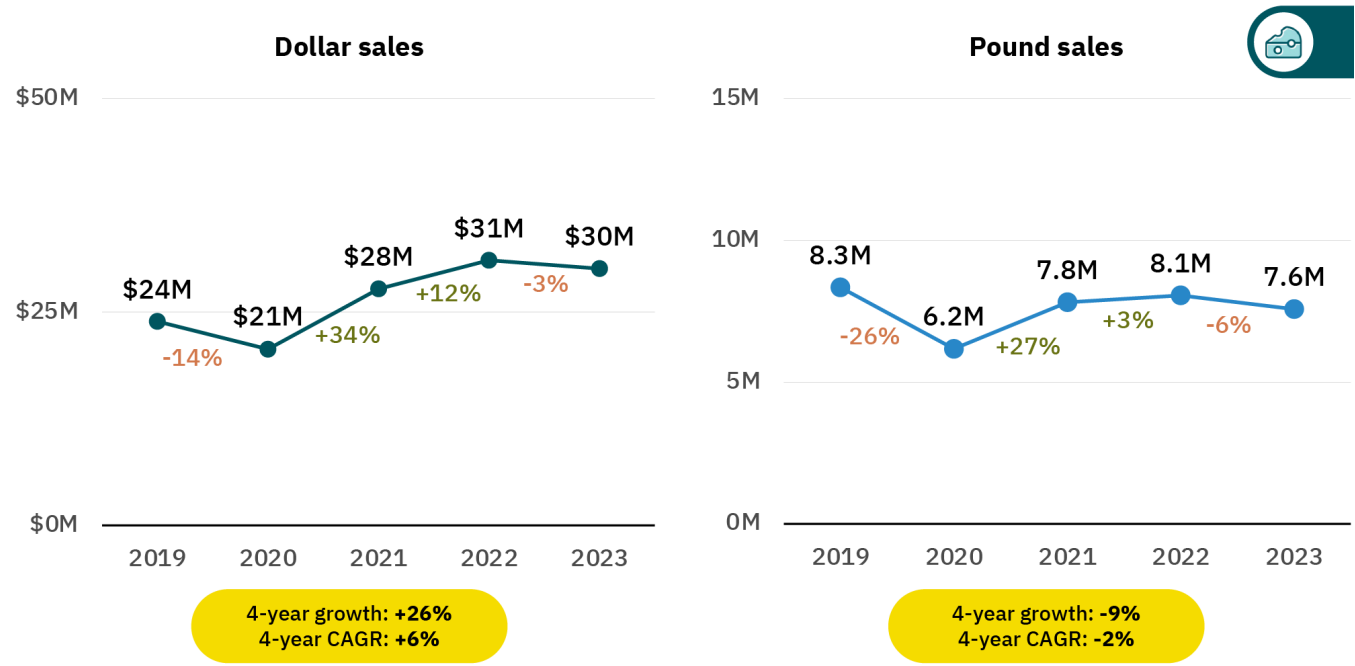
Plant-based cheese

Unlike plant-based milk, plant-based cheese represents a small portion (less than 0.5 percent of pound sales) of the total cheese market. Cheese in foodservice dishes is ubiquitous—pizza toppings, quesadillas, cheeseburgers, and mozzarella sticks are examples of popular menu items where cheese is a major or highlight component of a dish. The total conventional cheese category in broadline distributor foodservice sales is worth \$7.2 billion, making it a category roughly 7x the size of conventional milk and 1/7 the size of conventional meat.

The conventional cheese market size indicates a massive runway of opportunity for the plant-based cheese market in foodservice. Thus far, the category remains relatively small, and both dollar and pound sales declined from 2022 to 2023. **For plant-based cheese to effectively compete with conventional cheese in foodservice, function and taste will need to be optimized. Nailing characteristics like stretch, melt, and flavor will be crucial to the success of these products no matter the channel.**



Figure 11: U.S. broadline distributor foodservice sales
Plant-based cheese market, 2019–2023



Source: Circana/SupplyTrack, Product Class: Milk alternatives. Dollar and pound sales are 12 months ending December 2023 vs 4 prior years.

03 Consumer insights

The foodservice channel in the United States is undoubtedly a crucial environment for companies and brands to engage with consumers. Whether as a testing ground for a newly launched product or a key part of a distribution growth strategy, foodservice offers the chance for manufacturers to drive awareness and trial and build loyalty around their products. Among these, driving awareness and trial may be the most salient benefits the foodservice sector offers the plant-based food industry today.

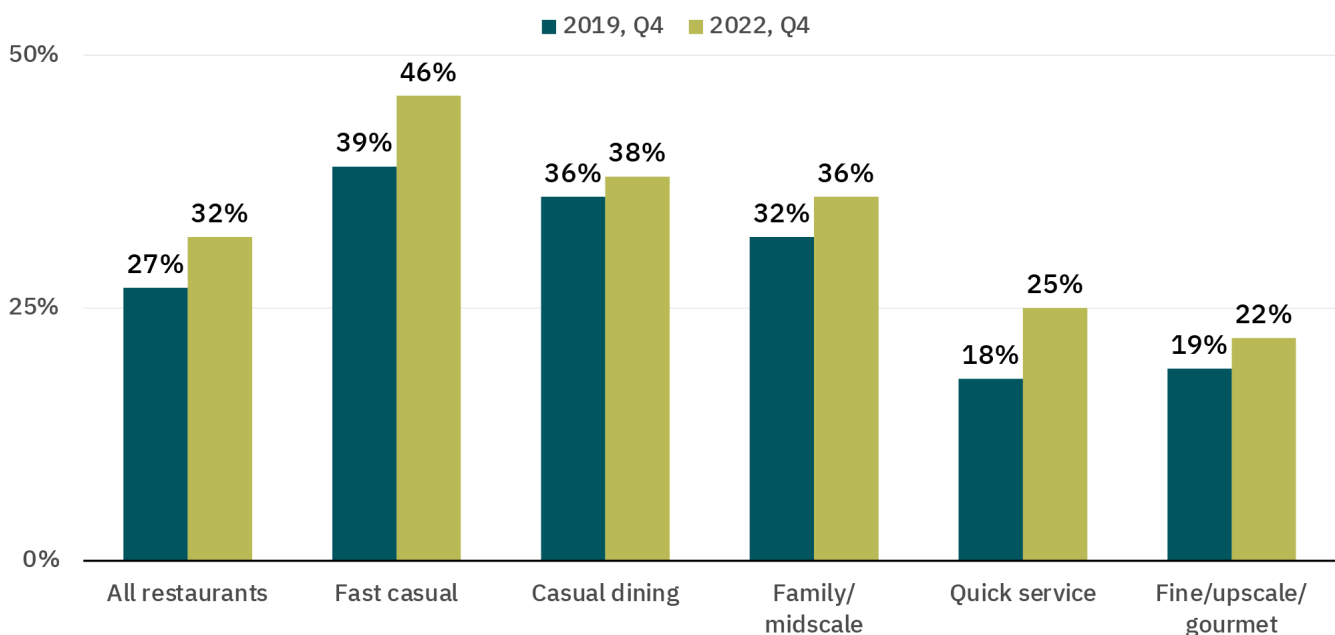
An August 2023 survey conducted by Morning Consult on behalf of GFI found that half of U.S. consumers are not too familiar or not familiar at all with plant-based meat and 39 percent have never tried plant-based meat products. For a nascent sector such as plant-based meat, creating opportunities for consumers to try products is crucial to improving acceptance and engagement on the path to adoption.

This is where the foodservice sector can play an impactful role. **By delivering unique, accessible, and often elevated experiences, this channel can move the needle on growing awareness and acceptance of the larger plant-based category.** Products have landed on many menus over the years, but opportunities abound for plant-based alternatives' presence to grow significantly in foodservice.

The current state of consumer engagement in foodservice

Looking across operator segments, plant-based meat alternatives have found themselves on more and more menus over the last few years. [Mintel reports](#) that plant-based meat menu penetration grew from 27 percent in 2019 to 32 percent in 2022 for all restaurants. Fast casual environments lead the way with nearly half of U.S. fast-casual menus containing a plant-based meat item, followed by casual dining and family/midscale restaurants.

Figure 12: Penetration of plant-based meat alternatives on menus



Source: Mintel Menu Insights reported in [Mintel Plant-Based Proteins US 2023 report](#), April 2023.

When it comes to how consumers are purchasing plant-based meat alternatives, it appears that out-of-home dining experiences play a secondary but meaningful role behind in-home eating. One-third of consumers who have tried plant-based meat more than once consume it when eating out at restaurants, according to an August 2023 survey conducted by Morning Consult on behalf of GFI.

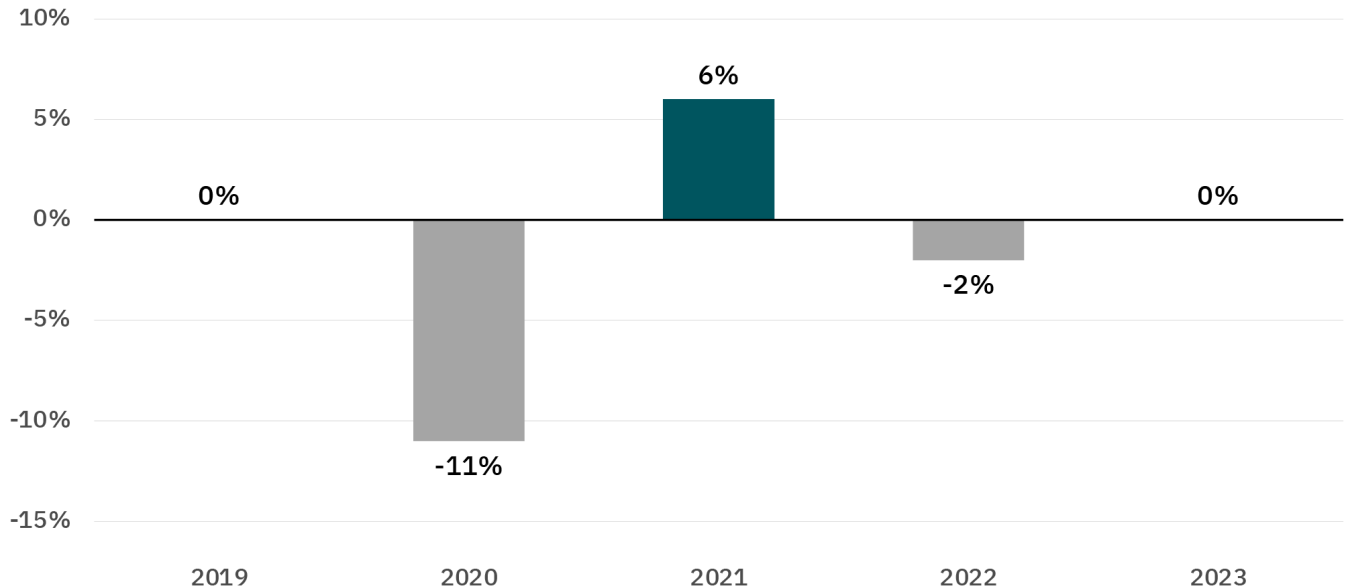
Similarly, an October 2023 survey of 1,500 U.S. respondents by [Dig Insights](#) found that 24 percent of respondents stated that they had ordered a dish including plant-based meat at a restaurant in the

past six months. This underscores a clear consumer interest in plant-based meat dishes, as well as the potential for operators to drive greater trial and repeat purchases.

Barriers to consumption

Since the pandemic, consumers are still working their way back to foodservice. In 2023, according to Circana, commercial foodservice traffic was flat compared to 2022 levels. One major factor slowing this return has been the impact of inflation on consumer budgets.

Figure 13: Overall commercial foodservice traffic change year-over-year



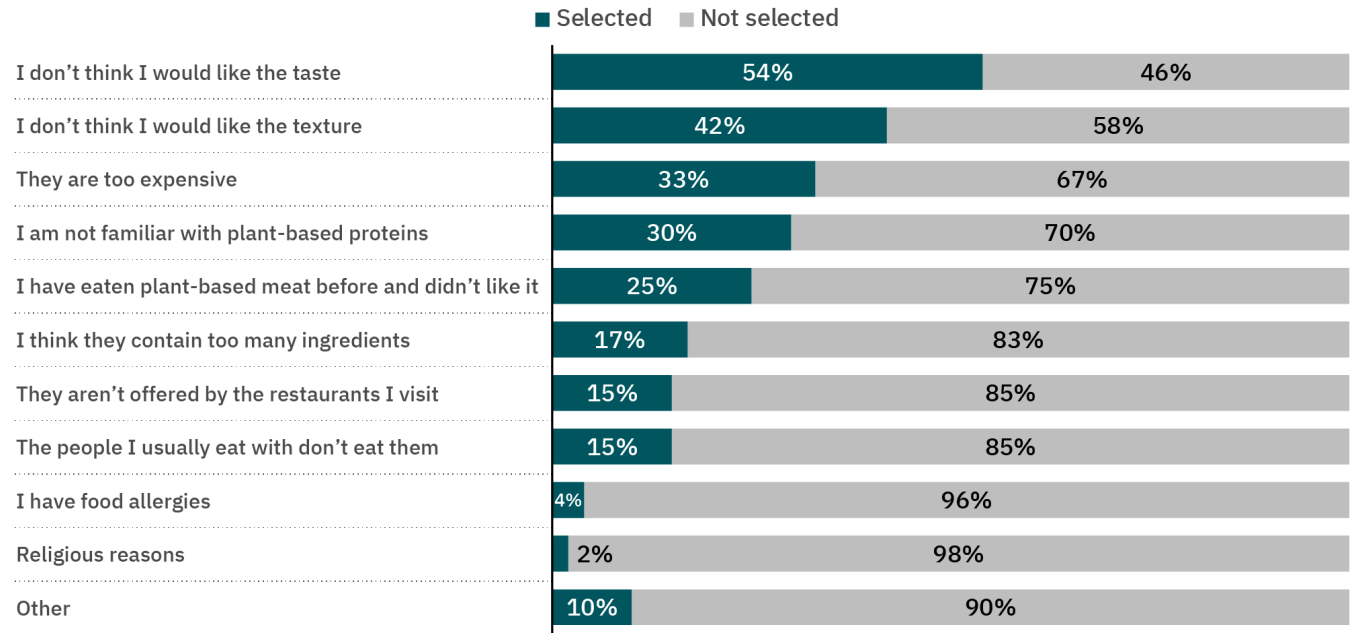
Source: Circana CREST U.S. Total commercial foodservice (restaurants and retail foodservice). 12 ME time periods.

A January 2023 survey from Morning Consult found that over half of U.S. adults say they made changes to the way they eat and drink in response to inflation. The leading behavior change reported was eating out at restaurants less often (83 percent) followed by eating less meat (72 percent) and going to bars less often (69 percent). With plant-based products often already priced at a premium compared to conventional options, this can make it a tough sell to consumers who are extra cost-sensitive.

Aside from the impact of inflation influencing purchasing behavior, other product concerns—namely taste— represent major barriers to consumption. From an October 2023 survey of 1,500 U.S. respondents by [Dig Insights](#), the leading reasons for not choosing to order a dish that includes plant-based meat at a restaurant are taste, texture, and price concerns.

Figure 14: What are the reasons you would not choose to order a dish that includes plant-based meat at a restaurant?

n=491



Source: [Dig Insights October 2023 survey](#) of 1,500 U.S. respondents

[Datassential's 2023 report](#) also found that taste was the top concern holding consumers back from ordering less meat and more plant-forward menu items followed by concern for paying too much for vegetables and other plant-based ingredients.

Taste remains a top barrier for consumers when it comes to deciding whether to return to the category or try it in the first place. In other words, a comparable or better taste is crucial for plant-based meat to start competing effectively with conventional meat. Foodservice can therefore deliver an elevated taste experience for first-time and repeat purchasers.

Opportunity: Taste is a top consideration for consumers when deciding what to eat. As alternative protein companies continue to push the boundaries of flavor and texture, collaborating

with chefs, who are the ultimate tastemakers, is key. Feedback gathered by GFI indicates that chefs value involvement in the product development phase and are more inclined to collaborate with companies or feature their products on menus when they've contributed to product formulation. Celebrity chef Spike Mendelsohn, co-founder and culinary director of PLNT Burger, said it best at GFI's 2023 Good Food Conference, "If you guys are running alt protein companies right now and you don't have a chef working on your team, get them involved!"

Check out the [chef panel discussion](#) at GFI's 2023 Good Food Conference



Motivations to purchase

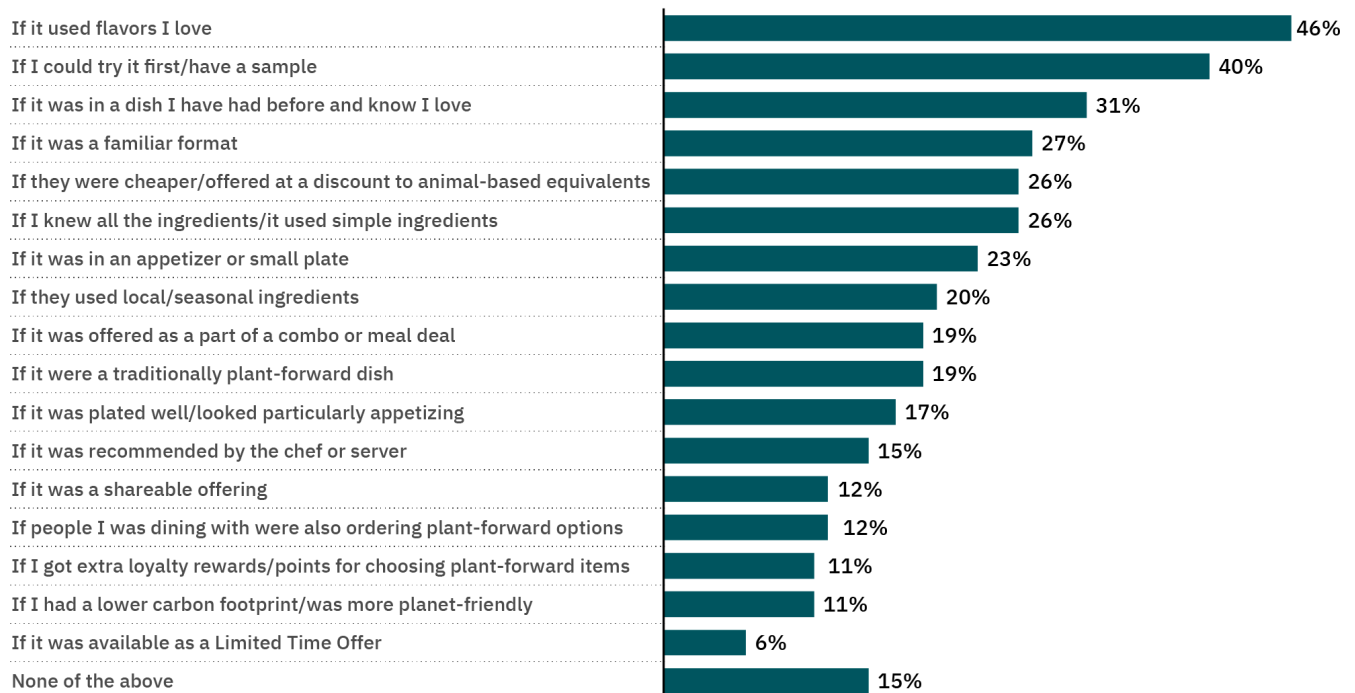
It's clear that improving taste would play a significant role in bringing new consumers to the category and keeping them around, but other opportunities also exist to motivate consumers to purchase plant-based menu items.

Focusing on familiarity can help lower the barrier to trial. According to [Datassential's 2023 report](#),

consumers would be motivated to choose plant-forward menu items if they used flavors they love, if they showed up in familiar dishes and formats, and if consumers were offered the chance to sample a product. **For buyers coming to a product or the category for the first time, having dishes show up in a familiar way can lower the friction to trial and elevate that first encounter.**



Figure 15: What would encourage you to select a plant-forward option from a menu?

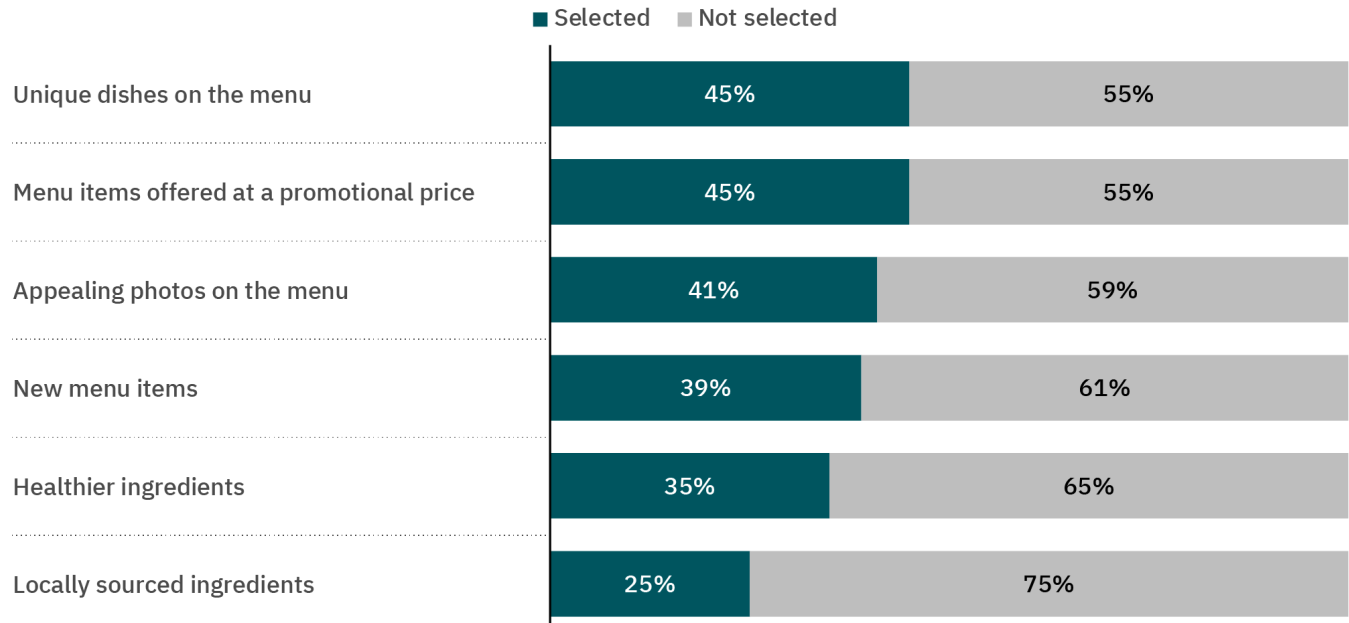


Source: [Datassential — 2023 Plant-Forward Opportunity Report](#), survey of 1,501 US consumers

While familiarity is important, novelty and uniqueness can also keep restaurant-goers engaged and excited. According to Mintel's 2023 report on [foodservice marketing strategies](#), alongside promotional pricing and appealing menu photos,

consumers are motivated to try a restaurant if it offers unique dishes and new menu items. Striking the balance between familiarity and novelty can be crucial to driving a successful and sustainable plant-based strategy.

Figure 16: Which of the following would motivate you to try a restaurant?

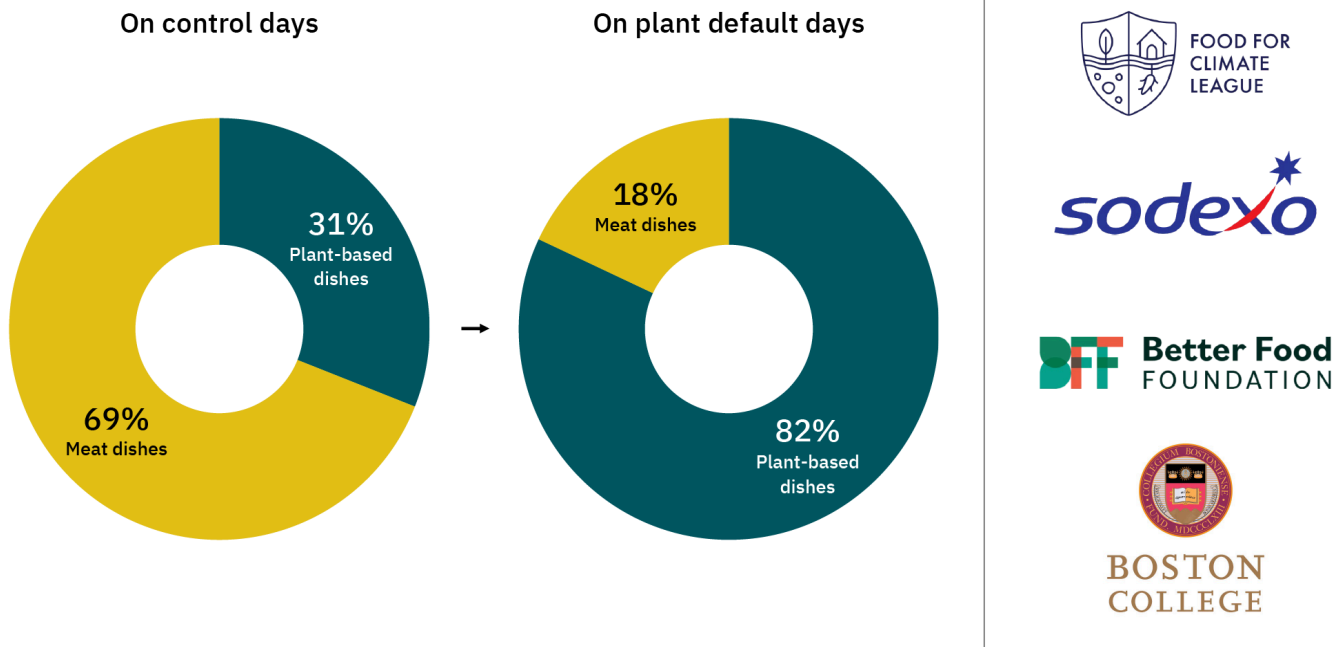


Source: [Mintel 2023 US Restaurant Marketing Strategies Report](#), n = 1,911 internet users aged 18+ who have ordered from a restaurant in the past three months

Another compelling tactic to drive buyers to plant-based options is by positioning them as the default option. For example, instead of the burger item on the menu being beef with the option to substitute a plant-based patty, the plant-based burger would be offered as the default and consumers would be able to request an animal-based beef patty. [A 2020 GFI analysis of various consumer research studies](#) indicates that changing the default menu item to plant-based is a powerful tool in driving purchases. Major chains and operators have leaned into this idea including [Burger King locations in Austria](#), [Starbucks' 2021 test of an entirely plant-based location](#), and [LinkedIn's pilot of a default strategy](#) in partnership with Greener By Default.

More recently, the Food For Climate League, in partnership with Better Food Foundation, Sodexo, and researchers at Boston College, [released insights](#) from a study testing the implementation of default plant-based dishes in dining hall stations at three U.S. universities. Among the two universities that implemented default plant-based dishes consistently throughout the study, the selection of plant-based dishes rose from 31 percent on control days to 82 percent on days where plant-based offerings were the default option.

Figure 17: Plant-based by default menu strategy



Source: Food for Climate League, Better Food Foundation, Sodexo, Boston College Researchers—May 2023 [Serving up Plants by Default study](#)

The default strategy is compelling for operators looking to drive purchases of their plant-based menu items and for companies looking for ways to hit sustainability targets.



Jennifer DiFrancesco
 Director, Culinary Innovation,
 Sodexo Campus

“We know that when we implement a default veg strategy that we see the increase of consumption because we are making it enticing for the guest and easier on our operators to execute from a production standpoint. Having the plant-based option front and center as a signature dish can pique the interest of flexitarians and meat eaters more because it’s approachable, relatable, and craveable. Having the ability to still ‘opt in’ to the animal protein gives the guest the choice while the plant protein being highlighted—it’s just flipping the script to how it has been historically menued.”

04 Conclusion

While 2023 was another challenging year for the foodservice industry, as inflation rates ease and consumers make a full return to restaurants, the market is poised to continue its decades-long growth trend.

For plant-based categories, the channel is ripe with potential. From university dining halls to fine dining restaurants, foodservice creates plentiful opportunities for plant-based proteins to reach key consumers in very specific environments. This makes the sector a crucial one for plant-based companies and brands to engage with:

- Product testing:** Placing a product at a local foodservice operator tends to be an easier feat than gaining distribution at a large U.S. retailer. This makes the channel a great place to launch new products and secure direct feedback from foodservice operators and target consumers.
- Driving trial:** Depending on the context, consumers may be more willing to try something new at a restaurant versus in a retail environment where they're shopping for the week and/or a family.
- Delivering on the first experience:** Dishes in foodservice are prepared by professionals trained to properly prepare the plant-based product(s). This is likely to result in an enhanced taste experience compared to cooking at home.
- Driving loyalty and repeat purchases:** A positive experience with a dish or product in foodservice can lead to repeat purchases inside or outside of the channel. Additionally, having distribution across food channels increases accessibility and makes it easier for loyal consumers to continue to engage with a brand.

For the long-term growth of plant-based categories in foodservice, namely plant-based meat, companies should continue to prioritize diversifying plant-based offerings on menus while advancing toward improved taste and price parity. Partnerships between manufacturers, distributors, and operators can advance these goals and deliver an elevated experience to the end consumer.

About the data

Distributor to operator sales data

GFI, in partnership with the Plant Based Foods Association, commissioned foodservice sales data from Circana, formerly IRI and NPD, focusing on various plant-based and conventional categories. Circana collects point-of-sale data from selected broadline distributors for their SupplyTrack Tracking Service. This data reflects itemized sales from broadline distributors shipped to foodservice operators. The SupplyTrack service currently tracks 17 participating broadline distributors, data from 280+ categories, and collects 700K+ operator purchases monthly. SupplyTrack covers ~41 percent of the total foodservice landscape (86 percent of all broadline distribution). Broadline distributor sales generally skew toward small/medium-sized chains and noncommercial operators and away from large chains; however, the data reaches both commercial and noncommercial operators across sizes and the following segment types:

- **Commercial:** QSR, FSR, Convenience Stores, Food Stores, and Other Retail.
- **Noncommercial:** Education, Government, Health Care, Business and Industry, Lodging/Casino, Recreation, and other noncommercial environments.

The SupplyTrack data obtained from Circana covers plant-based protein sales across the U.S. market for the five years 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023, all 12 months ending in December.

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About GFI

The Good Food Institute is a nonprofit think tank working to make the global food system better for the planet, people, and animals. Alongside scientists, businesses, and policymakers, GFI's teams focus on making plant-based and cultivated meat delicious, affordable, and accessible. Powered by philanthropy, GFI is an international network of organizations advancing alternative proteins as an essential solution needed to meet the world's climate, global health, food security, and biodiversity goals. To learn more, please visit gfi.org.



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