

NATION'S Restaurant News

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Meatless menus



Veggie-heavy brands see growth in sales, popularity with consumers

BY LISA JENNINGS

The number of U.S. adults who call themselves vegans and vegetarians is statistically small — about 3 percent. Nonetheless, a growing group of concepts is convinced there is a broad audience ready to embrace plant-based dining.

With names like The Veggie Grill, Native Foods, Real Food Daily and Maoz Vegetarian, these concepts are geared to the mounting number of so-called “flexitarians,” consumers who eat meat when the mood suits them, but who for health and/or environmental reasons are trying to eat less of it.

Today’s meatless concepts fit neatly into the fast-casual segment or with such health-haloed casual-dining players as True Food Kitchen and Seasons 52. And unlike the brown-rice-slugging vegetarian concepts of past decades often mocked as bland, the new players focus on

the quality of their food.

“It’s about serving delicious food that I’m going to feel good about eating later — and food that will be good for the planet,” said Greg Dollarhyde, chief executive of the seven-unit Veggie Grill chain based in Manhattan Beach, Calif. “We’re redefining American comfort food.”

Quantifying the number of people who avoid meat and animal products is difficult, partly because people define differently what it means to be vegetarian or vegan.

Following a 2009 Harris Interactive poll, the Vegetarian Resource Group estimated that about 3 percent of U.S. adults described themselves as vegetarian, meaning they never eat meat, poultry, fish or seafood. About one-third of those — an estimated 1 percent of the U.S. population — are vegan and never eat dairy, eggs and honey. About 8 percent of adults overall said they never eat meat.

Given such small numbers, it’s no surprise industry observers like Bonnie Riggs of research firm The NPD Group say vegetarian
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The popular All-American Stack at The Veggie Grill is made with a meatless grilled “veggie-steak” and topped with onion rings.

Chains find best defense depends on the offense

BY MARK BRANDAU

Following the recent dismissal of a high-profile lawsuit claiming that Taco Bell misrepresented its signature taco filling as beef, the 6,000-unit quick-service chain wasted no time hitting back against its accusers.

The Irvine, Calif.-based brand took out full-page ads in newspapers like the Wall Street Journal and USA Today asking the law firm that filed the suit, “Would it kill you to say you’re sorry?”

Many restaurants that find themselves under attack these days can no longer afford to take a passive approach to dealing with bad media exposure, experts say. As recent controversies with Taco Bell and McDonald’s have shown, when bad things happen to brands, the ways in which they respond must be proactive, fast and, ideally, overwhelming to detractors.

While observers say restaurant chains should try to avoid full-blown battles in the media

if possible, they need to take off the gloves once they’ve committed to the fight.

“The reason why Taco Bell did

it, and why I think it’s smart, is because the lawsuit was about their product,” said Linda Duke, chief executive of San Rafael,

Calif.-based Duke Marketing. “It wasn’t about their president or some kids in the store playing
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