

Increasing Sustainable, Vegetarian Food on the HBS Campus

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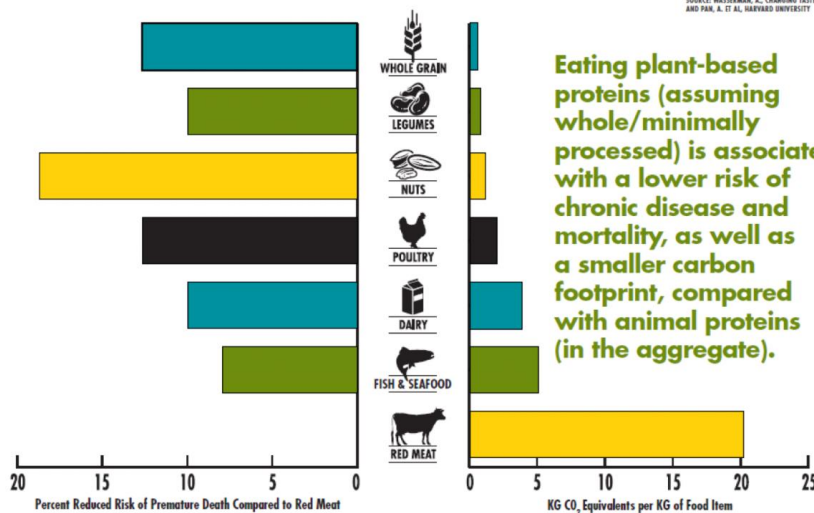
It's likely that you've heard of the negative health impacts of eating red meat: increased risks of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, etc. What's less well-known is the extreme negative environmental impacts of meat consumption. The meat industry is responsible for approximately one-fifth of all GHG emissions worldwide – by some calculations, greater than the global transportation sector. Raising beef requires 160 times more land and produces 11 times more GHG emissions per calorie than staples like potatoes, wheat, and rice.

Why is the meat industry so bad for the environment? Methane emissions from enteric fermentation (cow flatulence) are the main culprit, as methane traps up to 100 times more heat in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide within a five year period. Furthermore, raising cattle requires forestland and other natural vegetation to be cleared for pastures. For example, cattle ranching is responsible for four-fifths of deforestation in the Amazon rainforest. Cattle also require an enormous amount of feed, but only 1% of the feed that cattle eat is converted to calories that humans eat.

THE PROTEIN FLIP

SOME PROTEINS* ARE BETTER THAN OTHERS
FOR THE HEALTH OF THE PLANET AND THE POPULATION

SOURCE: WATSEMAN, A., CHANGING TASTES, AND PAUL, A. ET AL. HARVARD UNIVERSITY



Given the huge impacts of the meat industry on the environment and the recent advances and proliferation of plant-based meat alternatives, we decided to focus our Harvard Business School Student Sustainability Associate project on **increasing access to and consumption of sustainable, vegetarian foods on the HBS campus**. Shifting to a primarily plant-based diet can result in an almost 50% reduction in climate change emissions. Even without giving up meat entirely, switching from beef to fish or chicken makes a significant difference. We're passionate about the opportunity to combat climate change by changing our food system, and influencing consumer behavior is at the heart of driving this change. In designing our project, we focused on engaging with our classmates in a meaningful way, with the goal of influencing everyday behaviors.

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Initiative 1: Increase awareness of and access to sustainable foods

To encourage the HBS community to incorporate more plant-based protein into their diets, we worked with Restaurant Associate to launch the Menus of Change (MOC) Initiative. Every Wednesday, starting this past February, Restaurant Associates committed to serving only vegetarian dishes in the center line of Spangler Dining Hall. The initial MOC launch was received negatively by some who expected to see meat options when arriving at lunch.

Our first task was to build buy-in from the community. We developed and distributed educational and promotional materials to RCs detailing the environmental and health impacts of meat



consumption, coupled with displays in Spangler provided by SSA leadership, to promote the MOC initiative. In addition, we asked our classmates to submit their favorite vegetarian recipes, with three winning submissions to be selected by the Restaurant Associates chefs and prepared in the Grille for dinner each Wednesday night in March. Sections with winning submissions would win a celebratory dinner that evening, subsidized by the HBS Business and Environment Initiative and with free dessert provided by Restaurant Associates.

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While the impact may be difficult to measure, enthusiasm and engagement of both the student population and Restaurant Associates around MOC indicated that we were on to something. We received 35 recipe submissions, and had 150 dinner attendees cumulatively across the three winning sections. Furthermore, Restaurant Associates noted an up-tick in positive comments around the MOC lunch offering. A number of students shared heartfelt notes explaining how this initiative gave them a “whole new outlook” when they walk into Spangler each day.

IMAGINE THIS
...if everyone in the U.S.
did not eat meat for just
one day a week, it would be
the equivalent of not driving
91 billion miles—
or taking 7.6 million cars
off the road.

TRY

MENUS OF CHANGE

Delicious, creative, globally-inspired
vegetarian dishes:
Good for people + Good for the planet

EVERY WEDNESDAY

RCs: Submit your best vegetarian recipes by Feb. 15
to win a section dinner celebration at the Grille:
ssarecipes@gmail.com.

As SSAs, we had the unique opportunity to bridge the gap between Restaurant Associates and the student body to promote change in a way that their team is unable to do. Going forward, we believe student representatives can empower groups like Restaurant Associates or HBS Operations to launch impactful sustainability initiatives through clear, relatable communication and direct student engagement.

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*Menus of Change poster
promoting Wednesday lunches
and the RC recipe competition*

Initiative 2: Reduce Container Waste in Spangler

Our second initiative was not part of our initial project proposal but inspired by conversations with Restaurant Associates. When RA informed us that Harvard Business School consumes the equivalent of seventy 16-ounce cups per student per semester, we realized that disposable container usage is another unsustainable feature of our dining habits that needs addressing.

We brainstormed strategies with RA with a focus on changes that we could test quickly. We considered financial incentives (e.g. a discount on reusable containers or a charge for disposables) but given time and logistical constraints decided to test whether simply rearranging Spangler Dining Hall might drive behavioral change. For example, we replaced the clamshells at the beginning of the salad buffet with china and reduced the number of clamshells on display. We made similar changes to the hot food buffet. Our hope was that, by making disposable containers less accessible, diners might be more inclined to use reusable plates and bowls. Student education was another important aspect of our strategy. We presented to RC sections RA's staggering data on container usage and widely advertised the goals of our initiative. Finally, with RA's help, we created signage discouraging the use of disposables unless on-the-go.

RA continued to track container usage throughout the semester and observed a 1.45% decline in usage (since January). While we see significant room for improvement, we are encouraged by the progress affected by such a small change. Research suggests that charging for disposables might most effectively discourage consumption. However, before imposing financial incentives, we would like to continue to work with RA in the fall to test alternative china/clamshell arrangements. We believe that incremental changes along with strong messaging to the community could make a measurable impact.

A Note of Thanks

We cannot thank Restaurant Associates enough for their support on this project! Todd Mulder, Martha Torres, Chef Todd Young, Chef Camilo Meneses, Chef Mackenzie Davenport, and the team rolled out Menus of Change, hosted section celebrations, patiently allowed us to test different china arrangements, and helped us analyze our findings. Our project would not have been a success without you!