

Previous studies of consumers in Europe has shown that **50% are cutting down on meat**. The market for plant-based protein products is growing and PROTEIN2FOOD has identified key drivers and barriers for the acceptance of these new products. In a **focus group study**, the project recruited 28 people from the Netherlands (aged 18 - 35), who stated that they had one or more meatless days per week (flexitarians). The participants tested 11 plant-based protein foods and were asked for impressions and main motivation for reducing meat. Furthermore, an **online survey** with 881 participants from Denmark, Germany and Spain was conducted to establish whether the identified drivers and barriers could represent the general EU-population.

Main Achievements

The product categories tested were meat replacers, snacks, staple foods and smart meal options, all based on new plant-protein sources. The **key barriers** identified were unfamiliarity with the product, fear of new food types, and sensory aspects (textures, taste, smell, visual). However, unfamiliarity with the protein source were not a barrier, as long as participants could easily grasp how to cook and combine it with other flavours.

"I am not familiar with this new food technology, but if it is sustainable and healthy, I would be willing to try it.

– Study participant"

The **key drivers** for purchasing plant-based foods were reduction of the environmental footprint, and animal well-being. An openness to new foods showed to be crucial for making this transition to plant-based products. When asked if they were considering increasing their plant protein intake their response was: *"we don't care about increasing protein, we care about avoiding sugar"*.

Although plant-based protein foods often target the "conscious consumer", the study shows that many consumers still struggle to assess what the best food option is, because they find it hard to make sense of messages on product labels and in the news. The focus group participants stated that they have mixed feelings about regularly consuming soy-based products due to the impact of imported soy on the environment and on their health. At the same time, the European Organic Logo was highly appreciated. This points towards a **need for more information** and **clearer indicators of environmental footprints** and nutritional information on foods.

Top 3 reasons for reducing meat intake:

- 1 Environmental impact
- 2 Animal well-being
- 3 Health benefits



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Impacts

Transparency in branding

Flexitarians are motivated to change their behaviour to benefit the environment, their health and animal wellbeing. Yet, they feel lost when it comes to eating truly healthy and environmentally friendly, due to all the mixed messages they receive daily through the (social) media. Scandals hit this group extra hard and can completely turn them off a brand, product or specific plant protein. Having a transparent, honest and understandable story behind a product, can contribute to more consumer trust and brand loyalty.

Careful claiming

When developing products, claims must be thoroughly considered. The claim: *'this product is/contains a natural source of plant protein'* was generally associated with sustainability and health. High-protein staple foods, like bread and pasta, were considered 'positive for the gut, extra filling, and more expensive but less sustainable' compared to their conventional counterparts. A product containing pulses with this quote was assumed to 'stimulate muscle growth', while sweet snacks bearing the same claim were more likely considered 'overly processed'. High-quality meat replacers were considered less sustainable, while meat replacers that resembled their vegetable raw product or tempeh/tofu were considered much more sustainable.

Consumers across EU

The online survey showed that although there are some overarching aspects that drive consumption of plant-based products in the EU, important parameters vary just as much across countries as the individual consumer. Furthermore, most participants stated they prefer new products based on pulses rather than other protein alternatives such as soy, insects or cell-cultured meat.

Recommendations

- New plant-based protein products should come with an **easy to understand use** and role in the existing food landscape.
- Plant-based products aimed at replacing animal-based should be **better than existing product** in terms of environmental impact, healthiness and price.
- There is a desire from consumers in the Netherlands for **local alternatives to soy**.
- **Take care with claims** like 'replaced with', 'added to', or 'sugar-free' as conscious consumers quickly feel that the product is 'messed with' and may consider it highly processed.
- When using new food technologies, make sure to **explain** the environmental and health **benefits**.
- Having a "clean" and **accessible ingredient list** was highly appreciated. From the consumers point of view a "clean label" implies an understandable list of ingredients in the foods they consume. When a product naturally contains sugar, it should be clearly explained in the ingredient list.

References

PROTEIN2FOOD (2017). [Deliverable 4.2 – Report on consumer preferences and protein choice behaviour.](#)

For more information visit: <https://www.protein2food.eu>



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